

APRIL 1997

interZone

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118

'Reasons to be Cheerful'

by Greg Egan

plus new stories from

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Dominic Green

M. Turville Heitz

Ben Jeapes



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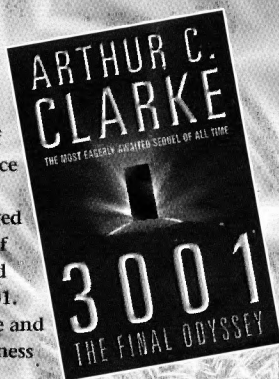
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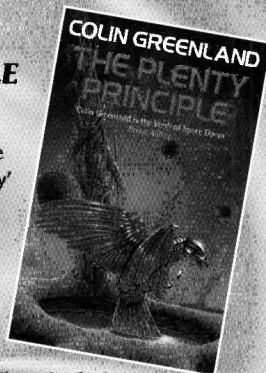
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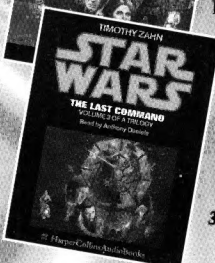
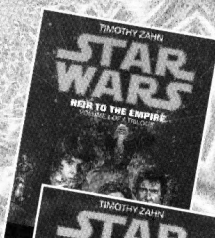
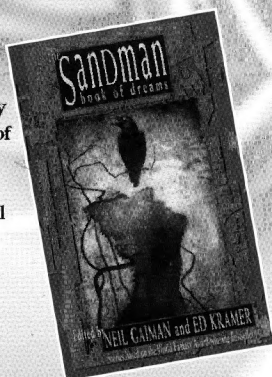
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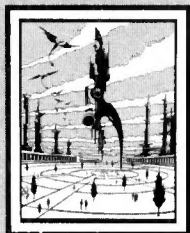
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interZone

April 1997

118

science fiction & fantasy

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Dear Editors:

I can hardly believe your efforts to resuscitate that arch line of literary snobbery, "It isn't science fiction, you know, it's much too good for that." (Editorial, issue 116, February 1997.) Not least because you publish a magazine with the phrase "science fiction and fantasy" on the contents page! So what, if sf embraces *Star Trek* and *The X-Files* as well as George Orwell and *The Odyssey*? Judith Krantz writes romances, as did Jane Austen. Jeffrey Archer does suspense stories, as did Alfred Hitchcock. Are these modes ineradicably tainted by their association with the commercially formulaic? No one would dispute that modern classics such *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *On the Beach* have immensely enriched the sf canon, but the idea that literary influence has been all one-way, or that it is those who stand outside the genre who've done most to take it forward, is simply unsupportable. And the closer we come to the present, the more risible that proposition becomes.

For instance, take some of the texts you chose as representative of the 1980s: *The Man Who Mastered Time*, *O-Zone*, *Einstein's Monsters*, *Stark*, *The Cloning of Joanna May* and *The Child in Time*. Can any one of these seriously stand comparison with the likes of Benford's *Timescape* (1980), Clarke's *2010* (1982), Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985), Bear's *Blood Music* (1985) and Womack's *Terraplane* (1989), for ideative novelty, sociopolitical insight, narrative zest and even – yes, indeed! – literary craft? I think not.

And just what, precisely, have these mainstream authors had to say for themselves? The likes of Martin Amis, Ben Elton, Fay Weldon and Ian McEwan have spent most of the last two decades trying to persuade us that Britain has gone to hell in a handcart under the sinister hegemony of M. Thatcher and the City of London. Nothing could be further from the truth. The championing of free-market enterprise and the consequent rout of socialism has transformed this country's prospects. In less than 20 years, Britain has gone from being the sick man of Europe, an object of continental derision, to become Europe's stellar economic performer, lionized by the OECD, the global blueprint for a deregulatory, *laissez-aller* revolution. If the towering intellects of the literary mainstream had had their way (*Guardian* readers to a person, one suspects), none of this would have happened and Britain would still look

like the cold-water Cuba it came to resemble circa 1979.

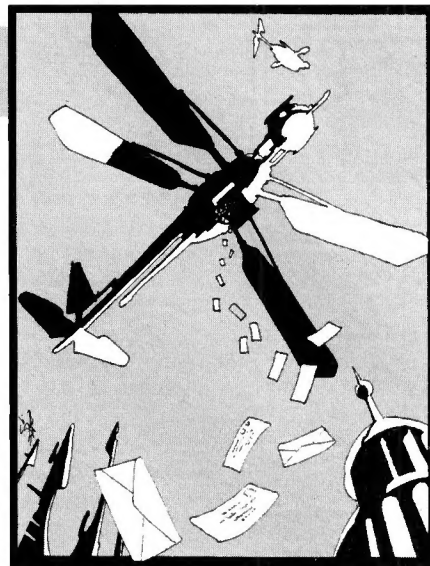
Besides, isn't it the sf authors that are grabbing all the headlines? Ballard, of course – recently acclaimed "the greatest living English novelist," no less, by the *Sunday Times Review of Books*. Clarke, interviewed extensively about the recent Martian discoveries, with the *Sunday Times* devoting huge amounts of space and an editorial to *3001*, months before publication, and all the broadsheets going overboard to commemorate the fictional inauguration of HAL on January 12, 1997. And Gibson, once again all over the TV and radio, the colour supplements and the computer magazines.

Labels are indispensable. Without them there can be no abstract reasoning, no way of managing the torrent of impressions. Hollywood recognizes that it is science fiction, in its many guises, that the public wants to see at the cinema and on television, and hence operates explicitly to satisfy this demand, sometimes clumsily, but never condescendingly. The results are often disappointing, but not always so. Even working within that environment there's still plenty of room to be creatively adventurous. Take a look at Industrial Light & Magic's sumptuous new portfolio *Into the Digital Realm* and ask yourself if you could do better. If the publishing industry is too dumb, or too precious, to capitalize on such an obvious trend, then that's their lookout. In any case, science fiction has never had much need of the anaemic litterateurs, or their crumbs of critical approbation.

Keith Walton

Walsall, W. Midlands

Editor: Well, let's ignore the political diatribe in your third paragraph, although I'm sure many "Guardian-reading" Interzone subscribers will be suitably riled by it. I'll try to reply to some of your remarks about sf and the mainstream. My editorial article was intended to point out: a) that the term science fiction (invariably rendered "sci-fi") has become devalued in recent decades, and that to many ordinary people it now signifies only kids' stuff; and b) that a host of mainstream writers have continued to write what we would call sf, even if they and their publishers shun the label. I was not trying to say, "if it's good it can't be sf"; rather, I was suggesting that we may have lost the Battle of the Name. To most people the letters "SF" just mean *San Francisco*, or nothing at all; on the other hand, science fiction, or sci-fi,



immediately evokes *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

I won't argue with your estimation of the novels you name by genre authors such as Bear and Benford, Gibson and Sterling, etc. But I would claim that most of these books (Gibson probably excepted) have been less successful in reaching a large audience than the novels by "mainstreamers" (some of which have had second incarnations as films or TV serials). My principal point about mainstream sf is that works, it succeeds in getting through to a large number of people, in a way that too much genre sf fails to do. We're happy in our enclave, for the most part, and we know that we have some fine writers in here with us, but meanwhile the possibility exists that we are becoming more and more remote from the real world. (And that wider culture, insofar as it notices us at all, thinks we're interested only in *Star Trek* and UFOs.) It's against this background that one can understand the instinct of certain "crossover" writers like Vonnegut and Ballard to go mainstream...

Dear Editors:

I'm been meaning to comment on your "Interface" piece in *IZ* 116. Do we need the label "science fiction"? I suspect that if we did not have it, we would be looking for a term to describe the kind of writing featured by the books you list. I doubt whether it would be "science fiction" – many of these books do not have science at their heart (but then neither does *Star Wars* or *Trek* despite the frequent technobabble!) – but I suspect that whatever it was it would crystallize into a genre.

Many of the books you list are, of course, in the mental maps of many science-fiction fans – when I first read George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* or Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo*, I read them

as part of a diet of Heinlein, Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke and the rest and had no idea that they were not science-fiction writers in the classic or genre sense – they appealed to that same sense of wonder which caused me to read sf in the first place. I knew that they were better than most of what I was reading, but I could not have described their difference. Furthermore, several of the books cited are – despite their “mainstream” credibility – not very good (and I suspect that other, critically-acclaimed books such as Anna Kavan’s *Ice* and M. K. Joseph’s *The Hole in the Zero* have sold nowhere near the numbers of, and have influenced fewer people than Clarke or Asimov and other traditional, genre-based sf writers – I cite those two as among the few such writers who have actually reached readers beyond the magazine-driven fan-base).

I can’t fault your argument that many of the sf classics are written by people who are not part of the sf world (you could, as you suggest, have extended your starting-date backwards, for instance, and included Olaf Stapledon), and that many “science fiction-like” books would have been written if Gernsback and Campbell had never existed, but I can’t help thinking that your central argument falls apart on the reef of a “mainstream” which doesn’t quite exist in the way you describe it, and you realize it as soon as you write that “these books vary enormously.” Whatever the motivations of Pierre Boulle, *Planet of the Apes* became part of the current of genre sf. Gibson, for instance, remains a cult figure: it’s just that his cult is larger than “science fiction,” but it certainly includes it. I suspect that several of the writers cited read sf, even if they don’t choose to be published within the field.

Perhaps we could say instead that as many writers, including “realist” ones, experiment with historical and technological extrapolation, so science fiction is part of a general fascination with speculation. Though I am uneasily aware that this is merely a repetition of an argument that was well-rehearsed 30 years ago.

Andy Sawyer

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Editor: But it is an argument which has gained new urgency, as I have tried to say, because of the recent dom-

inance of media spinoffery in the public perception of sf. Certainly I would not dispute that Clarke and Asimov have influenced enormous numbers of people – but they are the exceptions that prove the rule. Most genre sf, however good it may be, influences only sf fans and other genre-sf writers.

As for the lack of a science basis in many of the “mainstream sf” works I cited, I’m not sure that it’s as lacking as you imply (Mark Lawson, for example, briefly rationalizes his alternative-timeline novel *Idlewild* by the simple expedient of quoting a paragraph from Stephen Hawking); and even if the science is lacking in some cases I’m not sure that it matters. I regard sf as being defined, not by its overt science-and-technology content but, by the degree to which it is “the literature of cognitive estrangement” (as Darko Suvin argued, going on 30 years ago). As such, it springs from the utopian tradition: at the heart of sf are to be found realistic, rational depictions of drastically altered or wholly imaginary societies – unreal worlds which reflect our own, as in a set of distorting mirrors, and which, often as not, express or at least imply pointed criticisms of the way we live now.

Science fiction (in the wide sense, including the best works of both genre writers and “mainstreamers”) is a 20th-century florescence of the great tradition of utopian fiction – if we assume that phrase to include anti-utopias, dystopias and “cacotopian” satires, as well as straightforward fictional programmes for better-organized societies (actually, programmatic utopias have tended to be the least interesting kind). In short, other worlds, other societies, other

peoples and other times are much more important to sf than mere hardware and hi-tech...

Dear Editors:

The last few *Interzones* have been exceptional, in particular numbers 112-114, with fine stories from Alexander Jablockov – his story seemed to me a brilliant send-up of our current obsession with health and fitness, or “body fascism,” as I’ve heard it called – Baxter and Bradshaw, Eugene Byrne’s and Kim Newman’s hilarious “Citizen Ed,” and in particular the M. John Harrison and Jonathan Carroll stories in the Nicholas Royle-edited issue. I thought Nick did a fine job and it was good to see the magazine taking a chance on publishing some more “left-field” stories than is usual. While some readers might complain that these stories are not science fiction *per se*, I think it’s important that a magazine like *Interzone* should continue to give space to stories whose speculative approach lies as much in their style and oblique view of the world as in their subject matter.

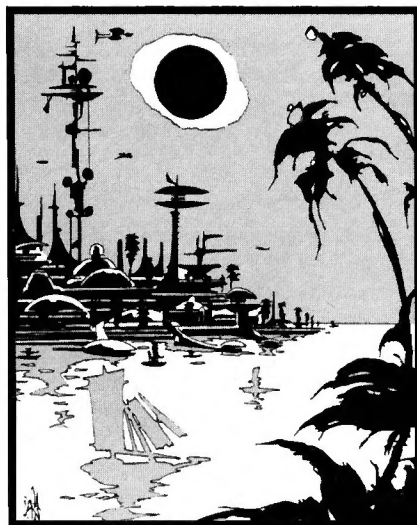
In these times of increasing homogeneity in popular art, it was timely too, to see a profile of Ballard, especially in light of the – yet again – hysterical furore over *Crash*. Surely the type of people who get their kicks out of violent films are not going to find much in the work of Cronenberg or Ballard to titillate them? Surely the real pornography of violence is on display in your average Arnie/Brucie/Sly movie where violence is presented, pure and simple, as entertainment and where there is no engagement with the ideas behind why violence fascinates us? Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy films like *The Terminator* and *Total Recall*, but when I watch something like Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* or *Dead Ringers*, it’s the ideas that the director is exploring that interest me more than the special effects.

Mike O’Driscoll

Swansea

Dear Editors:

A few thoughts on *Interzone* 116: the conclusion to “The Black Blood of the Dead” was nothing short of breathtaking. However underwhelmed I felt after reading part one, I feel more than compensated by the conclusion. The pace is much swifter. The scope of “The Hunger...” is significantly expanded. Wilde, “Sherrinford,” Coplestone and Lugard really come



alive. The other characters, while still a bit slim, do finally get something to say. Even the annoying phrases "the pseudonymous Sherrinford" and "Death's double" are hardly used.

I hadn't expected the story to take such a spectacularly cosmic turn and I'm very impressed indeed. I don't think there's much doubt now that Mr Stableford has plans to deliver a trilogy. There's plenty of scope for the story to be taken in a very different direction and I'm looking forward to seeing what he'll come up with. Hopefully it'll be a little faster to get going than "The Black Blood..." but will be just as astonishing.

"Refugees from an Imaginary Country": the imaginary country is so unpleasant that I found this story quite hard to take. On the other hand, once I got past the unpleasantness of it all there is a good story here and it's skilfully told. Mr Schweitzer appears to know his underground comics, and if the story is intended as a little tribute to them then I would say it succeeds on that level.

"Nights in the Gardens of the Kerhonkson Prison for the Aged and Infirm": that's a long title you've got there, Mr Disch. I liked this very much. Hard to spot the sf or fantasy in it, but so what. (*It was certainly a horror story* – Ed.)

"The Psychomantium": a slow-burning-fuse of a story that came good at the end. I tend to think that Molly Brown concentrates on creating a world that you can visualize her characters walking around in. Sometimes she does this at the expense of pace in the plot, but I don't mind because the experience as a whole is so memorable. "Project Timespan": a good debut. Gives every impression that there might be more good stuff to come from Mr Blaschke.

Moving on – having not read either *The Edge 3* or *Interzone 114* it's hard to know what to make of Graham Evans's letter in *IZ 116*. While it does seem that Andy Cox was at fault in some aspects of his review, Mr Evans does not come across well. Such obvious contempt for "unfortunate" authors and letter-writing "cronies" does not sit well with me.

The Neil Gaiman interview was entertaining. It's a shame there was no mention of *Death: The Time of Your Life* because somehow I've not read any review of it by anyone. I also might have liked to see Mr Gaiman challenged a little bit more over the TV version of *Neverwhere*. I can't believe he's as happy with it as he appears to be.

"Tube Corn." Good stuff from Wendy Bradley. I liked the tone very much and she didn't forget to say "in my opinion..." when she talked about her likes and dislikes. That's all for this month. I certainly seem to be

getting value for money on my subscription this time around. This was cracking issue, the conclusion of "The Black Blood..." being the obvious standout.

Chris Butler

Farnborough, Hants.

Dear Editors:

I have been a subscriber to *IZ* for a few months now and have noticed one or two letters in which the publishing of material by foreign authors has been advocated, one argument being that as much sf is about communication with aliens we should learn to communicate more with our closer neighbours.

I would like to support these calls for foreign sf, and suggest that you might even publish it in the original language alongside a translation. I am sure with a little advertisement in the pages of French, German, Italian, Spanish, etc., newspapers enough material could be gathered to produce one foreign story every four issues, and believe that such a ratio would not swamp those not interested in foreign languages.

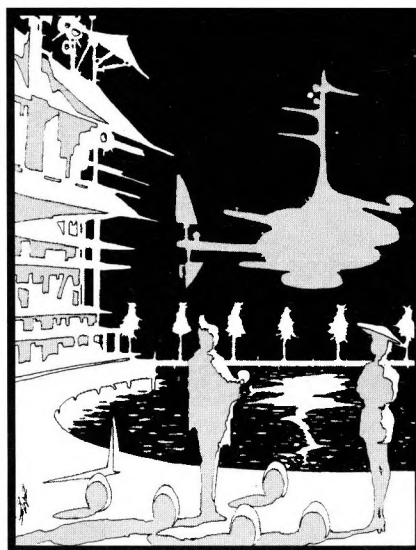
Apart from this your magazine is excellent! Keep up the good work!

P.S. I am studying French and Italian at university and would like to know if there are any genre authors in either of these languages whom you could recommend to me.

Malcolm Rowe

No address given

Editor: *We're not averse to publishing more stories by foreign authors, but I'm afraid the idea of printing text in a foreign language as well as in English strikes us as a non-starter. (And the placing of adverts in foreign newspapers would be beyond our means – probably pointless too: they would bring in a lot of rubbish.) As for the request in your "P.S." – would any readers with a knowledge of current French or Italian sf like to help*



out? As far as we know, no sf has been translated into English from those languages in recent years – apart from a few works by "mainstreamers" (see my listing in *Interzone 116*, the subject of the first letter in this column: there I mentioned, for instance, Bernard Werber's *Empire of the Ants* – which was originally *Les Fourmis*, Paris, 1991).

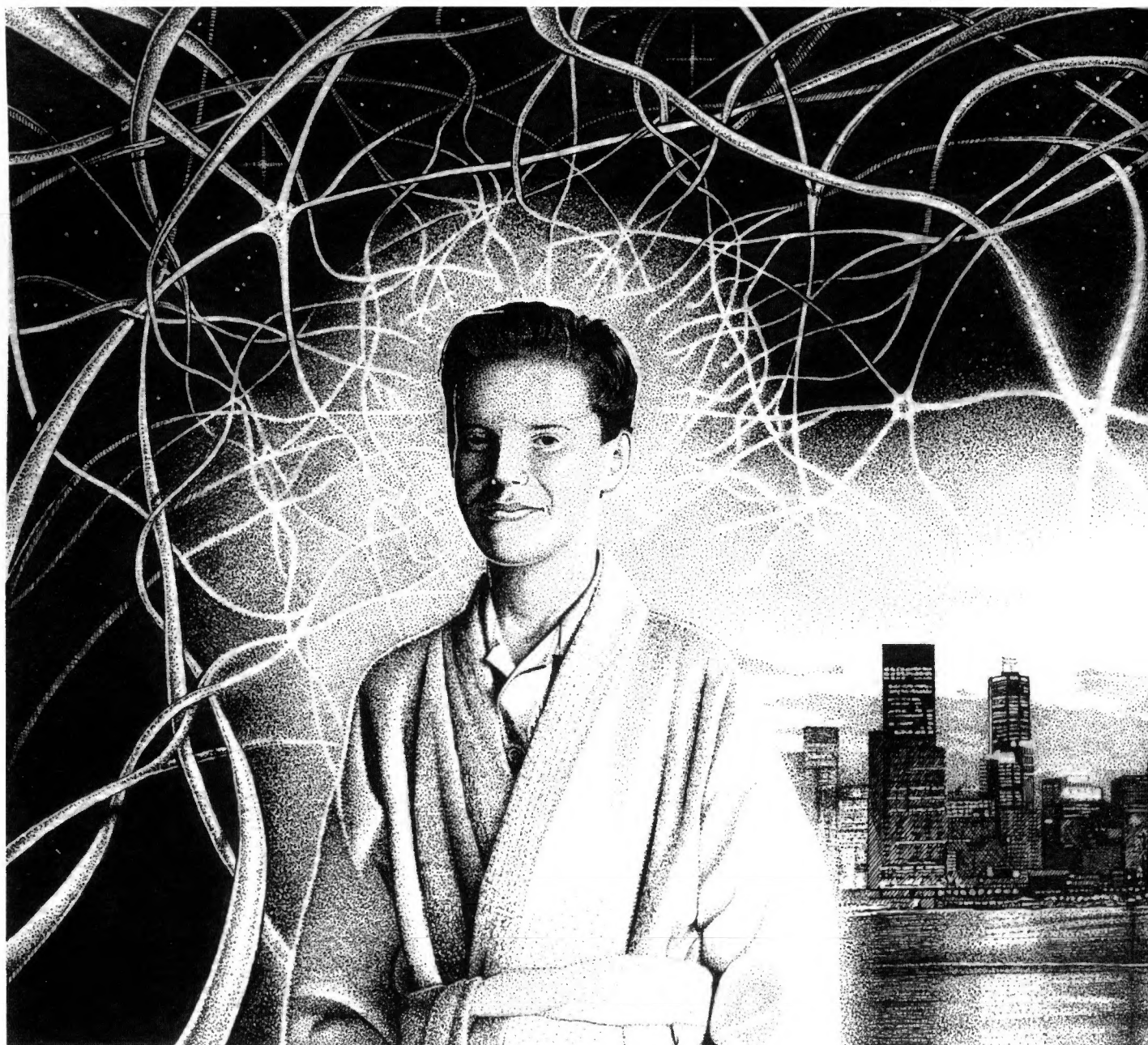
The heyday of sf translations-into-English was the 1970s, and one of its stalwarts was the late Donald A. Wollheim of DAW Books. Since he died, I've not noticed the company he founded making any effort to maintain its tradition of publishing foreign sf (in fact, they publish comparatively little sf any more, having become mainly a fantasy house whose headline authors are toasters like Melanie Rawn and Tad Williams). So let's spare a thought for the good Don Wollheim, some of whose editions of foreign authors such as the Strugatsky Brothers may still turn up in second-hand bookshops.

PARTY TIME

Opposite page: On 23rd January, the anthology, *The Best of Interzone*, edited by David Pringle, was launched at a party given by the publisher, HarperCollins, at the Forbidden Planet bookshop in New Oxford Street, London. Many of the contributing authors attended, along with other illuminati from the London sf publishing scene. Some of them are depicted opposite. From the top left, clockwise, they are: Chris Becket, David Pringle, Gary Kilworth, Ian Lee, Jackie Gresham, Geoff Ryman with Graham Head and Ken Brown, Christopher J. Fowler and Pat Cadigan, Jane Johnson of HarperCollins, Faith Brooker of Gollancz, John Meaney, Elizabeth Hand, and *Interzone's* newest star, Dominic Green. Centred below the book jacket: Eric Brown and Molly Brown (no relation, she claims).

The party continued at the Gollancz launch for Gwyneth Jones' new Aleutian novel *Phoenix Café*. The pictures here are drawn from both occasions.





-1-

In September 2004, not long after my twelfth birthday, I entered a state of almost constant happiness. It never occurred to me to ask why. Though school included the usual quota of tedious lessons, I was doing well enough academically to be able to escape into daydreams whenever it suited me. At home, I was free to read books and web pages about molecular biology and particle physics, quaternions and galactic evolution, and to write my own Byzantine computer games and convoluted abstract animations. And though I was a skinny, unco-ordinated child, and every elaborate, pointless organized sport left me comatose with boredom, I was comfortable enough with my body on my own terms. Whenever I ran – and I ran everywhere – it felt good.

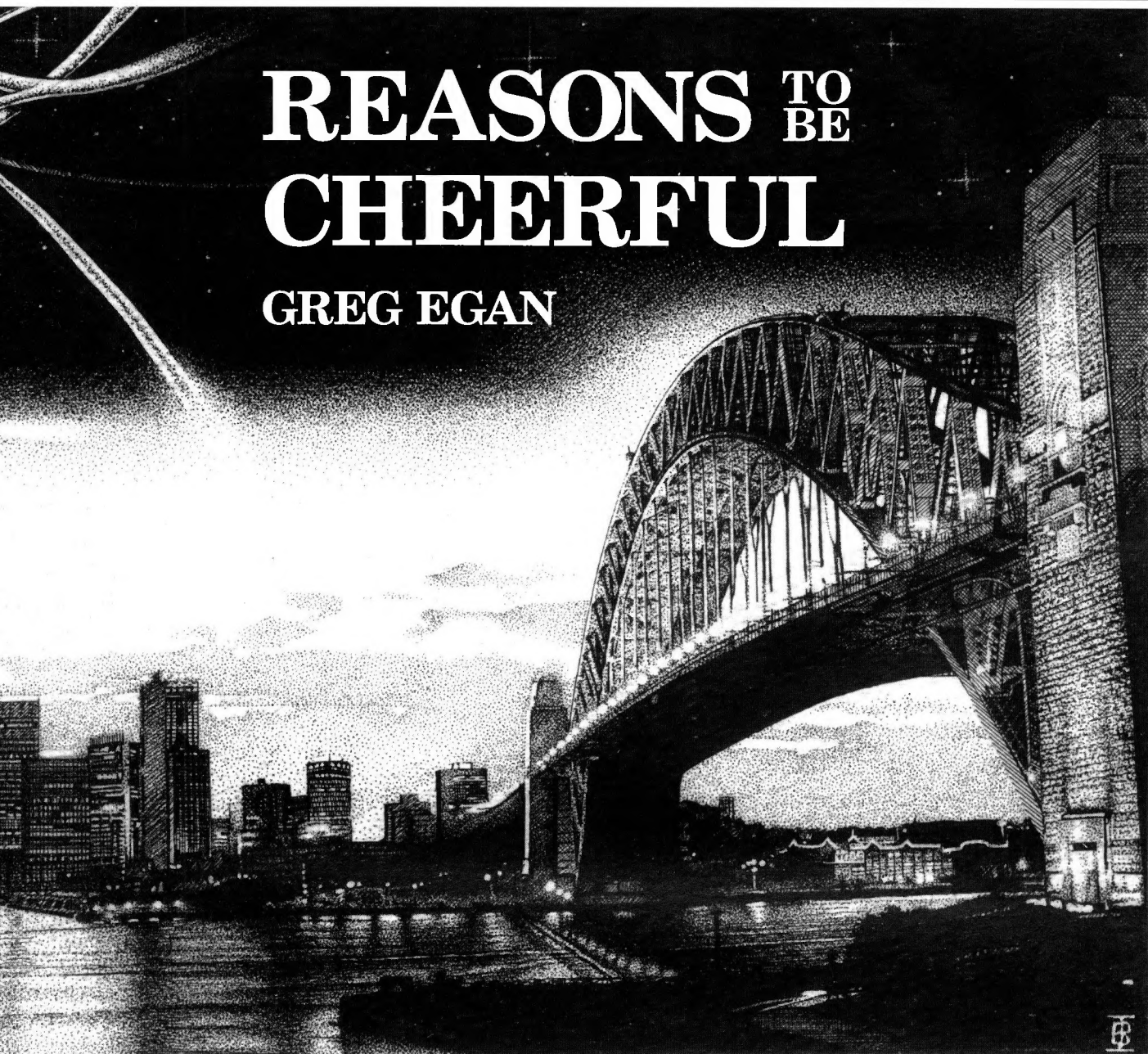
I had food, shelter, safety, loving parents, encour-

agement, stimulation. Why shouldn't I have been happy? And though I can't have entirely forgotten how oppressive and monotonous classwork and schoolyard politics could be, or how easily my usual bouts of enthusiasm were derailed by the most trivial problems, when things were actually going well for me I wasn't in the habit of counting down the days until it all turned sour. Happiness always brought with it the belief that it would last, and though I must have seen this optimistic forecast disproved a thousand times before, I wasn't old and cynical enough to be surprised when it finally showed signs of coming true.

When I started vomiting repeatedly, Dr Ash, our GP, gave me a course of antibiotics and a week off school. I doubt it was a great shock to my parents when this unscheduled holiday seemed to cheer me up rather more than any mere bacterium could bring me down, and if they were puzzled that I didn't even bother feigning misery, it would have been redundant for me to moan constantly about my aching stomach when I was throwing up authentically three or four times a day.

REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

GREG EGAN



Illustrations by Iain Byers

The antibiotics made no difference. I began losing my balance, stumbling when I walked. Back in Dr Ash's surgery, I squinted at the eye chart. She sent me to a neurologist at Westmead Hospital, who ordered an immediate MRI scan. Later the same day, I was admitted as an in-patient. My parents learnt the diagnosis straight away, but it took me three more days to make them spit out the whole truth.

I had a tumour, a medulloblastoma, blocking one of the fluid-filled ventricles in my brain, raising the pressure in my skull. Medulloblastomas were potentially fatal, though with surgery followed by aggressive radiation treatment and chemotherapy, two out of three patients diagnosed at this stage lived five more years.

I pictured myself on a railway bridge riddled with rotten sleepers, with no choice but to keep moving, trusting my weight to each suspect plank in turn. I understood the danger ahead, very clearly... and yet I felt no real panic, no real fear. The closest thing to terror I could summon up was an almost exhilarating rush of vertigo, as if I was facing nothing more than an audaciously harrowing fairground ride.

There was a reason for this.

The pressure in my skull explained most of my symptoms, but tests on my cerebrospinal fluid had also revealed a greatly elevated level of a substance called Leu-enkephalin – an endorphin, a neuropeptide which bound to some of the same receptors as opiates like morphine and heroin. Somewhere along the road to malignancy, the same mutant transcription factor that had switched on the genes enabling the tumour cells to divide unchecked had apparently also switched on the genes needed to produce Leu-enkephalin.

This was a freakish accident, not a routine side-effect. I didn't know much about endorphins then, but my parents repeated what the neurologist had told them, and later I looked it all up. Leu-enkephalin wasn't an analgesic, to be secreted in emergencies when pain threatened survival, and it had no stupefying narcotic effects to immobilize a creature while injuries healed. Rather, it was the primary means of signalling happiness, released whenever behaviour or circumstances warranted pleasure. Countless other brain activities modulated that simple message, cre-

ating an almost limitless palette of positive emotions, and the binding of Leu-enkephalin to its target neurons was just the first link in a long chain of events mediated by other neurotransmitters. But for all these subtleties, I could attest to one simple, unambiguous fact: Leu-enkephalin made you feel *good*.

My parents broke down as they told me the news, and I was the one who comforted them, beaming placidly like a beatific little child martyr from some tear-jerking oncological mini-series. It wasn't a matter of hidden reserves of strength or maturity; I was physically incapable of feeling bad about my fate. And because the effects of the Leu-enkephalin were so specific, I could gaze unflinchingly at the truth in a way that would not have been possible if I'd been doped up to the eyeballs with crude pharmaceutical opiates. I was clear-headed but emotionally indomitable, positively radiant with courage.

I had a ventricular shunt installed, a slender tube inserted deep into my skull to relieve the pressure, pending the more invasive and risky procedure of removing the primary tumour; that operation was scheduled for the end of the week. Dr Maitland, the oncologist, had explained in detail how my treatment would proceed, and warned me of the danger and discomfort I faced in the months ahead. Now I was strapped in for the ride and ready to go.

Once the shock wore off, though, my un-blissed-out parents decided that they had no intention of sitting back and accepting mere two-to-one odds that I'd make it to adulthood. They phoned around Sydney, then further afield, hunting for second opinions.

My mother found a private hospital on the Gold Coast – the only Australian franchise of the Nevada-based "Health Palace" chain – where the oncology unit was offering a new treatment for medulloblastomas. A genetically engineered herpes virus introduced into the cerebrospinal fluid would infect only the replicating tumour cells, and then a powerful cytotoxic drug, activated only by the virus, would kill the infected cells. The treatment had an 80 percent five-year survival rate, without the risks of surgery. I looked up the cost myself, in the hospital's web brochure. They were offering a package deal: three months' meals and accommodation, all pathology and radiology services, and all pharmaceuticals, for 60,000 dollars.

My father was an electrician, working on building sites. My mother was a sales assistant in a department store. I was their only child, so we were far from poverty-stricken, but they must have taken out a second mortgage to raise the fee, saddling themselves with a further 15 or 20 years' debt. The two survival rates were not that different, and I heard Dr Maitland warn them that the figures couldn't really be compared, because the viral treatment was so new. They would have been perfectly justified in taking her advice and sticking to the traditional regime.

Maybe my enkephalin sainthood spurred them on somehow. Maybe they wouldn't have made such a great sacrifice if I'd been my usual sullen and difficult self, or even if I'd been nakedly terrified rather than preternaturally brave. I'll never know for sure – and either way, it wouldn't make me think any less of them. But

just because the molecule wasn't saturating their skulls, that's no reason to expect them to have been immune to its influence.

On the flight north, I held my father's hand all the way. We'd always been a little distant, a little mutually disappointed in each other. I knew he would have preferred a tougher, more athletic, more extroverted son, while to me he'd always seemed lazily conformist, with a world-view built on unexamined platitudes and slogans. But on that trip, with barely a word exchanged, I could feel his disappointment being transmuted into a kind of fierce, protective, defiant love, and I grew ashamed of my own lack of respect for him. I let the Leu-enkephalin convince me that, once this was over, everything between us would change for the better.

From the street, the Gold Coast Health Palace could have passed for one more high-rise beachfront hotel – and even from the inside, it wasn't much different from the hotels I'd seen in video fiction. I had a room to myself, with a television wider than the bed, complete with network computer and cable modem. If the aim was to distract me, it worked. After a week of tests, they hooked a drip into my ventricular shunt and infused first the virus, and then three days later, the drug.

The tumour began shrinking almost immediately; they showed me the scans. My parents seemed happy but dazed, as if they'd never quite trusted a place where millionaire property-developers came for scrotal tucks to do much more than relieve them of their money and offer first-class double-talk while I continued to decline. But the tumour kept on shrinking, and when it hesitated for two days in a row the oncologist swiftly repeated the whole procedure, and then the tendrils and blobs on the MRI screen grew skinnier and fainter even more rapidly than before.

I had every reason to feel unconditional joy now, but when I suffered a growing sense of unease instead I assumed it was just Leu-enkephalin withdrawal. It was even possible that the tumour had been releasing such a high dose of the stuff that literally nothing could have made me *feel better* – if I'd been lofted to the pinnacle of happiness, there'd be nowhere left to go but down. But in that case, any chink of darkness in my sunny disposition could only confirm the good news of the scans.

One morning I woke from a nightmare – my first in months – with visions of the tumour as a clawed parasite thrashing around inside my skull. I could still hear the click of carapace on bone, like the rattle of a scorpion trapped in a jam jar. I was terrified, drenched in sweat... *liberated*. My fear soon gave way to a white-hot rage: the thing had drugged me into compliance, but now I was free to stand up to it, to bellow obscenities inside my head, to exorcize the demon with self-righteous anger.

I did feel slightly cheated by the sense of anticlimax that came from chasing my already-fleeing nemesis downhill, and I couldn't entirely ignore the fact that imagining my anger to be driving out the cancer was a complete reversal of true cause and effect – a bit like watching a forklift shift a boulder from my chest, then pretending to have moved it myself by a mighty act of inhalation. But I made what sense I could of my belated emotions, and left it at that.

Six weeks after I was admitted, all my scans were clear, and my blood, CSF and lymphatic fluid were free of the signature proteins of metastasizing cells. But there was still a risk that a few resistant tumour cells remained, so they gave me a short, sharp course of entirely different drugs, no longer linked to the herpes infection. I had a testicular biopsy first – under local anaesthetic, more embarrassing than painful – and a sample of bone marrow taken from my hip, so my potential for sperm production and my supply of new blood cells could both be restored if the drugs wiped them out at the source. I lost hair and stomach lining, temporarily, and I vomited more often, and far more wretchedly, than when I'd first been diagnosed. But when I started to emit self-pitying noises, one of the nurses steelily explained that children half my age put up with the same treatment for months.

These conventional drugs alone could never have cured me, but as a mopping-up operation they greatly diminished the chance of a relapse. I discovered a beautiful word: *apoptosis* – cellular suicide, programmed death – and repeated it to myself, over and over. I ended up almost relishing the nausea and fatigue; the more miserable I felt, the easier it was to imagine the fate of the tumour cells, membranes popping and shrivelling like balloons as the drugs commanded them to take their own lives. *Die in pain, zombie scum!* Maybe I'd write a game about it, or even a whole series, culminating in the spectacular *Chemotherapy III: Battle for the Brain*. I'd be rich and famous, I could pay back my parents, and life would be as perfect in reality as the tumour had merely made it seem to be.

I was discharged early in December, free of any trace of disease. My parents were wary and jubilant in turn, as if slowly casting off the fear that any premature optimism would be punished. The side-effects of the chemotherapy were gone; my hair was growing back, except for a tiny bald patch where the shunt had been, and I had no trouble keeping down food. There was no point returning to school now, two weeks before the year's end, so my summer holidays began immediately. The whole class sent me a tacky, insincere, teacher-orchestrated get-well e-mail, but my friends visited me at home, only slightly embarrassed and intimidated, to welcome me back from the brink of death.

So why did I feel so bad? Why did the sight of the clear blue sky through the window when I opened my eyes every morning – with the freedom to sleep-in as long as I chose, with my father or mother home all day treating me like royalty, but keeping their distance and letting me sit unnagged at the computer screen for 16 hours if I wanted – why did that first glimpse of daylight make me want to bury my face in the pillow, clench my teeth and whisper: *"I should have died, I should have died"*?

Nothing gave me the slightest pleasure. Nothing – not my favourite netzines or web sites, not the *njari* music I'd once revelled in, not the richest, the sweetest, the saltiest junk food that was mine now for the asking. I couldn't bring myself to read a whole page of any book, I couldn't write ten lines of code. I couldn't look my real-world friends in the eye, or face the thought of going online.

Everything I did, everything I imagined, was tainted with an overwhelming sense of dread and shame. The only image I could summon up for comparison was from a documentary about Auschwitz that I'd seen at school. It had opened with a long tracking shot, a news-reel camera advancing relentlessly towards the gates of the camp, and I'd watched that scene with my spirits sinking, already knowing full well what had happened inside. I wasn't delusional; I didn't believe for a moment that there was some source of unspeakable evil lurking behind every bright surface around me. But when I woke and saw the sky, I felt the kind of sick foreboding that would only have made sense if I'd been staring at the gates of Auschwitz.

Maybe I was afraid that the tumour would grow back, but not *that* afraid. The swift victory of the virus in the first round should have counted for much more, and on one level I did think of myself as lucky, and suitably grateful. But I could no more rejoice in my escape, now, than I could have felt suicidally bad at the height of my enkephalin bliss.

My parents began to worry, and dragged me along to a psychologist for "recovery counselling." The whole idea seemed as tainted as everything else, but I lacked the energy for resistance. Dr Bright and I "explored the possibility" that I was subconsciously choosing to feel miserable because I'd learnt to associate happiness with the risk of death, and I secretly feared that re-creating the tumour's main symptom could resurrect the thing itself. Part of me scorned this facile explanation, but part of me seized on it, hoping that if I owned up to such subterranean mental gymnastics it would drag the whole process into the light of day, where its flawed logic would become untenable. But the sadness and disgust that everything induced in me – birdsong, the pattern of our bathroom tiles, the smell of toast, the shape of my own hands – only increased.

I wondered if the high levels of Leu-enkephalin from the tumour might have caused my neurons to reduce their population of the corresponding receptors, or if I'd become "Leu-enkephalin-tolerant" the way a heroin addict became opiate-tolerant, through the production of a natural regulatory molecule that blocked the receptors. When I mentioned these ideas to my father, he insisted that I discuss them with Dr Bright, who feigned intense interest but did nothing to show that he'd taken me seriously. He kept telling my parents that everything I was feeling was a perfectly normal reaction to the trauma I'd been through, and that all I really needed was time, and patience, and understanding.

I was bundled off to high school at the start of the new year, but when I did nothing but sit and stare at my desk for a week, arrangements were made for me to study online. At home, I did manage to work my way slowly through the curriculum, in the stretches of zombie-like numbness that came between the bouts of sheer, paralysing unhappiness. In the same periods of relative clarity, I kept thinking about the possible causes of my affliction. I searched the biomedical literature and found a study of the effects of high doses of Leu-enkephalin in cats, but it seemed to show that any tolerance would be short-lived.

Then, one afternoon in March – staring at an elec-

tron micrograph of a tumour cell infected with herpes virus, when I should have been studying dead explorers – I finally came up with a theory that made sense. The virus needed special proteins to let it dock with the cells it infected, enabling it to stick to them long enough to use other tools to penetrate the cell membrane. But if it had acquired a copy of the Leu-enkephalin gene from the tumour's own copious RNA transcripts, it might have gained the ability to cling, not just to replicating tumour cells, but to every neuron in my brain with a Leu-enkephalin receptor.

And then the cytotoxic drug, activated only in infected cells, would have come along and killed them all.

Deprived of any input, the pathways those dead neurons normally stimulated were withering away. Every part of my brain able to feel pleasure was dying. And though at times I could, still, simply feel nothing, mood was a shifting balance of forces. With nothing to counteract it, the slightest flicker of depression could now win every tug-of-war, unopposed.

I didn't say a word to my parents; I couldn't bear to tell them that the battle they'd fought to give me the best possible chance of survival might now be crippling me. I tried to contact the oncologist who'd treated me on the Gold Coast, but my phone calls floundered in a Muzak-filled moat of automated screening, and my e-mail was ignored. I managed to see Dr Ash alone, and she listened politely to my theory, but she declined to refer me to a neurologist when my only symptoms were psychological: blood and urine tests showed none of the standard markers for clinical depression.

The windows of clarity grew shorter. I found myself spending more and more of each day in bed, staring out across the darkened room. My despair was so monotonous, and so utterly disconnected from anything real, that to some degree it was blunted by its own absurdity: no one I loved had just been slaughtered, the cancer had almost certainly been defeated, and I could still grasp the difference between what I was feeling and the unarguable logic of real grief, or real fear.

But I had no way of casting off the gloom and feeling what I wanted to feel. My only freedom came down to a choice between hunting for reasons to justify my sadness – deluding myself that it was my own, perfectly natural response to some contrived litany of misfortunes – or disowning it as something alien, imposed from without, trapping me inside an emotional shell as useless and unresponsive as a paralysed body.

My father never accused me of weakness and ingratitude; he just silently withdrew from my life. My mother kept trying to get through to me, to comfort or provoke me, but it reached the point where I could barely squeeze her hand in reply. I wasn't literally paralysed or blind, speechless or feeble-minded. But all the brightly lit worlds I'd once inhabited – physical and virtual, real and imaginary, intellectual and emotional – had become invisible, and impenetrable. Buried in fog. Buried in shit. Buried in ashes.

By the time I was admitted to a neurological ward, the dead regions of my brain were clearly visible on an MRI scan. But it was unlikely that anything could have halted the process even if it had been diagnosed sooner.

And it was certain that no one had the power to reach into my skull and restore the machinery of happiness.

-2-

The alarm woke me at ten, but it took me another three hours to summon up the energy to move.

I threw off the sheet and sat on the side of the bed, muttering half-hearted obscenities, trying to get past the inescapable conclusion that I shouldn't have bothered. Whatever pinnacles of achievement I scaled today (managing not only to go shopping, but to buy something other than a frozen meal) and whatever monumental good fortune befell me (the insurance company depositing my allowance before the rent was due) I'd wake up tomorrow feeling exactly the same.

Nothing helps, nothing changes. Four words said it all. But I'd accepted that long ago; there was nothing left to be disappointed about. And I had no reason to sit here lamenting the bleeding obvious for the thousandth time.

Right?

Fuck it. Just keep moving.

I swallowed my "morning" medication, the six capsules I'd put out on the bedside table the night before, then went into the bathroom and urinated a bright yellow stream consisting mainly of the last dose's metabolites. No antidepressant in the world could send me to Prozac Heaven, but this shit kept my dopamine and serotonin levels high enough to rescue me from total catatonia – from liquid food, bedpans and sponge baths.

I splashed water on my face, trying to think of an excuse to leave the flat when the freezer was still half full. Staying in all day, unwashed and unshaven, did make me feel worse: slimy and lethargic, like some pale parasitic leech. But it could still take a week or more for the pressure of disgust to grow strong enough to move me.

I stared into the mirror. Lack of appetite more than made up for lack of exercise – I was as immune to carbohydrate comfort as I was to runner's high – and I could count my ribs beneath the loose skin of my chest. I was 30 years old, and I looked like a wasted old man. I pressed my forehead against the cool glass, obeying some vestigial instinct which suggested that there might be a scrap of pleasure to be extracted from the sensation. There wasn't.

In the kitchen, I saw the light on the phone: there was a message waiting. I walked back into the bathroom and sat on the floor, trying to convince myself that it didn't have to be bad news. No one had to be dead. And my parents couldn't break up twice.

I approached the phone and waved the display on. There was a thumbnail image of a severe-looking middle-aged woman, no one I recognized. The sender's name was Dr Z. Durrani, Department of Biomedical Engineering, University of Cape Town. The subject line read: "New Techniques in Prosthetic Reconstructive Neuroplasty." That made a change; most people skimmed the reports on my clinical condition so carelessly that they assumed I was mildly retarded. I felt a refreshing absence of disgust, the closest I could come to respect, for Dr Durrani. But no amount of diligence on her part

could save the cure itself from being a mirage.

Health Palace's no-fault settlement provided me with a living allowance equal to the minimum wage, plus reimbursement of approved medical costs; I had no astronomical lump sum to spend as I saw fit. However, any treatment likely to render me financially self-sufficient could be paid for in full, at the discretion of the insurance company. The value of such a cure to Global Assurance – the total remaining cost of supporting me until death – was constantly falling, but then so was medical research funding, worldwide. Word of my case had got around.

Most of the treatments I'd been offered so far had involved novel pharmaceuticals. Drugs *had* freed me from institutional care, but expecting them to turn me into a happy little wage-earner was like hoping for an ointment that made amputated limbs grow back. From Global Assurance's perspective, though, shelling out for anything more sophisticated meant gambling with a much greater sum – a prospect that no doubt sent my case manager scrambling for his actuarial database. There was no point indulging in rash expenditure decisions when there was still a good chance that I'd suicide in my 40s. Cheap fixes were always worth a try, even if they were long shots, but any proposal radical enough to stand a real chance of working was guaranteed to fail the risk/cost analysis.

I knelt by the screen with my head in my hands. I could erase the message unseen, sparing myself the frustration of knowing exactly what I'd be missing out on... but then, not knowing would be just as bad. I tapped the PLAY button and looked away; meeting the gaze of even a recorded face gave me a feeling of intense shame. I understood why: the neural circuitry needed to register positive non-verbal messages was long gone, but the pathways that warned of responses like rejection and hostility had not merely remained intact, they'd grown skewed and hypersensitive enough to fill the void with a strong negative signal, whatever the reality.

I listened as carefully as I could while Dr Durrani explained her work with stroke patients. Tissue-cultured neural grafts were the current standard treatment, but she'd been injecting an elaborately tailored polymer foam into the damaged region instead. The foam released growth factors that attracted axons and dendrites from surrounding neurons, and the polymer itself was designed to function as a network of electrochemical switches. Via microprocessors scattered throughout the foam, the initially amorphous network was programmed first to reproduce generically the actions of the lost neurons, then fine-tuned for compatibility with the individual recipient.

Dr Durrani listed her triumphs: sight restored, speech restored, movement, continence, musical ability. My own deficit – measured in neurons lost, or synapses, or raw cubic centimetres – lay beyond the range of all the chasms she'd bridged to date. But that only made it more of a challenge.

I waited almost stoically for the one small catch, in six or seven figures. The voice from the screen said, "If you can meet your own travel expenses and the cost of a three-week hospital stay, my research grant will cover the treatment itself."

I replayed these words a dozen times, trying to find a



less favourable interpretation – one task I was usually good at. When I failed, I steeled myself and e-mailed Durrani's assistant in Cape Town, asking for clarification.

There was no misunderstanding. For the cost of a year's supply of the drugs that barely kept me conscious, I was being offered a chance to be whole again for the rest of my life.

Organizing a trip to South Africa was completely beyond me, but once Global Assurance recognized the opportunity it was facing, machinery on two continents swung into action on my behalf. All I had to do was fight down the urge to call everything off. The thought of being hospitalized, of being powerless again, was disturbing enough, but contemplating the potential of the neural prosthesis itself was like staring down the calendar at a secular Judgment Day. On 7th March 2023, I'd either be admitted into an infinitely larger, infinitely richer, infinitely better world... or I'd prove to be damaged beyond repair. And in a way, even the final death of hope was a far less terrifying prospect than the alternative; it was so much closer to where I was already, so much easier to imagine. The only vision of *happiness* I could summon up was myself as a child, running joyfully, dissolving into sunlight – which was all very sweet and evocative, but a little short on practical details. If I'd wanted to be a sunbeam, I could have cut my wrists anytime. I wanted a job, I wanted a family, I wanted ordinary love and modest ambitions – because I knew these were the things I'd been denied. But I could no more imagine what it would be like, finally, to attain them, than I could picture daily life in 26-dimensional space.

I didn't sleep at all before the dawn flight out of Sydney. I was escorted to the airport by a psychiatric nurse, but spared the indignity of a minder sitting beside me all the way to Cape Town. I spent my waking moments on the flight fighting paranoia, resisting the temptation to invent reasons for all the sadness and anxiety coursing through my skull. *No one on the plane was staring at me disdainfully. The Durrani technique was not going to turn out to be a hoax.* I succeeded in crushing these "explanatory" delusions... but as ever, it remained beyond my power to alter my feelings, or even to draw a clear line between my purely pathological unhappiness, and the perfectly reasonable anxiety that anyone would feel on the verge of radical brain surgery.

Wouldn't it be bliss, not to have to fight to tell the difference all the time? Forget happiness; even a future full of abject misery would be a triumph, so long as I knew that it was always for a reason.

Luke De Vries, one of Durrani's postdoctoral students, met me at the airport. He looked about 25, and radiated the kind of self-assurance I had to struggle not to misread as contempt. I felt trapped and helpless immediately; he'd arranged everything, it was like stepping on to a conveyor belt. But I knew that if I'd been left to do anything for myself the whole process would have ground to a halt.

It was after midnight when we reached the hospital in the suburbs of Cape Town. Crossing the car park, the insect sounds were wrong, the air smelt indefinably alien, the constellations looked like clever forgeries. I

sagged to my knees as we approached the entrance.

"Hey!" De Vries stopped and helped me up. I was shaking with fear, and then shame too, at the spectacle I was making of myself.

"This violates my Avoidance Therapy."

"Avoidance Therapy?"

"Avoid hospitals at all costs."

De Vries laughed, though if he wasn't merely humouring me I had no way of telling. Recognizing the fact that you'd elicited genuine laughter was a pleasure, so those pathways were all dead.

He said, "We had to carry the last subject in on a stretcher. She left about as steady on her feet as you are."

"That bad?"

"Her artificial hip was playing up. Not our fault."

We walked up the steps and into the brightly lit foyer.

The next morning – Monday, 6th March, the day before the operation – I met most of the surgical team who'd perform the first, purely mechanical, part of the procedure: scraping clean the useless cavities left behind by dead neurons, prising open with tiny balloons any voids that had been squeezed shut, and then pumping the whole oddly-shaped totality full of Durrani's foam. Apart from the existing hole in my skull from the shunt 18 years before, they'd probably have to drill two more.

A nurse shaved my head and glued five reference markers to the exposed skin, then I spent the afternoon being scanned. The final, three-dimensional image of all the dead space in my brain looked like a spelunker's map, a sequence of linked caves complete with rockfalls and collapsed tunnels.

Durrani herself came to see me that evening. "While you're still under anaesthetic," she explained, "the foam will harden, and the first connections will be made with the surrounding tissue. Then the microprocessors will instruct the polymer to form the network we've chosen to serve as a starting point."

I had to force myself to speak; every question I asked – however politely phrased, however lucid and relevant – felt as painful and degrading as if I was standing before her naked asking her to wipe shit out of my hair. "How did you find a network to use? Did you scan a volunteer?" Was I going to start my new life as a clone of Luke De Vries – inheriting his tastes, his ambitions, his emotions?

"No, no. There's an international database of healthy neural structures – 20,000 cadavers who died without brain injury. More detailed than tomography; they froze the brains in liquid nitrogen, sliced them up with a diamond-tipped microtome, then stained and electron-micrographed the slices."

My mind balked at the number of exabytes she was casually invoking; I'd lost touch with computing completely. "So you'll use some kind of composite from the database? You'll give me a selection of typical structures, taken from different people?"

Durrani seemed about to let that pass as near enough, but she was clearly a stickler for detail, and she hadn't insulted my intelligence yet. "Not quite. It will be more like a multiple exposure than a composite. We've used about 4,000 records from the database – all the males in their 20s or 30s – and wherever someone has neuron A wired to neuron B, and someone else has neuron A wired to neuron C... you'll have connections

to both B and C. So you'll start out with a network that in theory could be pared down to any one of the 4,000 individual versions used to construct it – but in fact, you'll pare it down to your own unique version instead."

That sounded better than being an emotional clone or a Frankenstein collage; I'd be a roughly hewn sculpture, with features yet to be refined. But –

"Pare it down how? How will I go from being potentially anyone, to being...?" *What?* My 12-year-old self, resurrected? Or the 30-year-old I should have been, conjured into existence as a remix of these 4,000 dead strangers? I trailed off; I'd lost what little faith I'd had that I was talking sense.

Durrani seemed to grow slightly uneasy, herself – whatever my judgment was worth on that. She said, "There should be parts of your brain, still intact, which bear some record of what's been lost. Memories of formative experiences, memories of the things that used to give you pleasure, fragments of innate structures that survived the virus. The prosthesis will be driven automatically towards a state that's compatible with everything else in your brain – it will find itself interacting with all these other systems, and the connections that work best in that context will be reinforced." She thought for a moment. "Imagine a kind of artificial limb, imperfectly formed to start with, that adjusts itself as you use it: stretching when it fails to grasp what you reach for, shrinking when it bumps something unexpectedly... until it takes on precisely the size and shape of the phantom limb implied by your movements. Which itself is nothing but an image of the lost flesh and blood."

That was an appealing metaphor, though it was hard to believe that my faded memories contained enough information to reconstruct their phantom author in every detail – that the whole jigsaw of who I'd been, and might have become, could be filled in from a few hints along the edges and the jumbled-up pieces of 4,000 other portraits of happiness. But the subject was making at least one of us uncomfortable, so I didn't press the point.

I managed to ask a final question. "What will it be like, before any of this happens? When I wake up from the anaesthetic and all the connections are still intact?"

Durrani confessed, "That's one thing I'll have no way of knowing, until you tell me yourself."

Someone repeated my name, reassuringly but insistently. I woke a little more. My neck, my legs, my back were all aching, and my stomach was tense with nausea.

But the bed was warm, and the sheets were soft. It was good just to be lying there.

"It's Wednesday afternoon. The operation went well."

I opened my eyes. Durrani and four of her students were gathered at the foot of the bed. I stared at her, astonished: the face I'd once thought of as "severe" and "forbidding" was... riveting, magnetic. I could have watched her for hours. But then I glanced at Luke De Vries, who was standing beside her. He was just as extraordinary. I turned one by one to the other three students. Everyone was equally mesmerizing; I didn't know where to look.

"How are you feeling?"

I was lost for words. These people's faces were loaded with so much significance, so many sources of fascina-

tion, that I had no way of singling out any one factor: they all appeared wise, ecstatic, beautiful, reflective, attentive, compassionate, tranquil, vibrant... a white noise of qualities, all positive, but ultimately incoherent.

But as I shifted my gaze compulsively from face to face, struggling to make sense of them, their meanings finally began to crystallize – like words coming into focus, though my sight had never been blurred.

I asked Durrani, "Are you smiling?"

"Slightly." She hesitated. "There are standard tests, standard images for this, but... please, describe my expression. Tell me what I'm thinking."

I answered unselfconsciously, as if she'd asked me to read an eye chart. "You're... curious? You're listening carefully. You're interested, and you're... hoping that something good will happen. And you're smiling because you think it will. Or because you can't quite believe that it already has."

She nodded, smiling more decisively. "Good."

I didn't add that I now found her stunningly, almost painfully, beautiful. But it was the same for everyone in the room, male and female: the haze of contradictory moods that I'd read into their faces had cleared, but it had left behind a heart-stopping radiance. I found this slightly alarming – it was too indiscriminate, too intense – though in a way it seemed almost as natural a response as the dazzling of a dark-adapted eye. And after 18 years of seeing nothing but ugliness in every human face, I wasn't ready to complain about the presence of five people who looked like angels.

Durrani asked, "Are you hungry?"

I had to think about that. "Yes."

One of the students fetched a prepared meal, much the same as the lunch I'd eaten on Monday: salad, a bread roll, cheese. I picked up the roll and took a bite. The texture was perfectly familiar, the flavour unchanged. Two days before, I'd chewed and swallowed the same thing with the usual mild disgust that all food induced in me.

Hot tears rolled down my cheeks. I wasn't in ecstasy; the experience was as strange and painful as drinking from a fountain with lips so parched that the skin had turned to salt and dried blood.

As painful, and as compelling. When I'd emptied the plate, I asked for another. *Eating was good, eating was right, eating was necessary.* After the third plate, Durrani said firmly, "That's enough." I was shaking with the need for more; she was still supernaturally beautiful, but I screamed at her, outraged.

She took my arms, held me still. "This is going to be hard for you. There'll be surges like this, swings in all directions, until the network settles down. You have to try to stay calm, try to stay reflective. The prosthesis makes more things possible than you're used to... but you're still in control."

I gritted my teeth and looked away. At her touch I'd suffered an immediate, agonizing erection.

I said, "That's right. I'm in control."

In the days that followed, my experiences with the prosthesis became much less raw, much less violent. I could almost picture the sharpest, most ill-fitting edges of the network being – metaphorically – worn smooth by use. To eat, to sleep, to be with people remained intensely

pleasurable, but it was more like an impossibly rosy-hued dream of childhood than the result of someone poking my brain with a high voltage wire.

Of course, the prosthesis wasn't sending signals into my brain in order to make my brain feel pleasure. *The prosthesis itself* was the part of me that was feeling all the pleasure – however seamlessly that process was integrated with everything else: perception, language, cognition... the rest of me. Dwelling on this was unsettling at first, but on reflection no more so than the thought experiment of staining blue all the corresponding organic regions in a healthy brain, and declaring, “*They feel all the pleasure, not you!*”

I was put through a battery of psychological tests – most of which I'd sat through many times before, as part of my annual insurance assessments – as Durrani's team attempted to quantify their success. Maybe a stroke patient's fine control of a formerly paralysed hand was easier to measure objectively, but I must have leapt from bottom to top of every numerical scale for positive affect. And far from being a source of irritation, these tests gave me my first opportunity to use the prosthesis in new arenas – to be happy in ways I could barely remember experiencing before. As well as being required to interpret mundanely rendered scenes of domestic situations – what has just happened between this child, this woman, and this man; who is feeling good and who is feeling bad? – I was shown breathtaking images of great works of art, from complex allegorical and narrative paintings to elegant minimalist essays in geometry. As well as listening to snatches of everyday speech, and even unadorned cries of joy and pain, I was played samples of music and song from every tradition, every epoch, every style.

That was when I finally realized that something was wrong.

Jacob Tsela was playing the audio files and noting my responses. He'd been deadpan for most of the session, carefully avoiding any risk of corrupting the data by betraying his own opinions. But after he'd played a heavenly fragment of European classical music, and I'd rated it 20 out of 20, I caught a flicker of dismay on his face.

“What? You didn't like it?”

Tsela smiled opaquely. “It doesn't matter what I like. That's not what we're measuring.”

“I've rated it already, you can't influence my score.” I regarded him imploringly; I was desperate for communication of any kind. “I've been dead to the world for 18 years. I don't even know who the composer was.”

He hesitated. “J. S. Bach. And I agree with you: it's sublime.” He reached for the touchscreen and continued the experiment.

So what had he been dismayed about? I knew the answer immediately; I'd been an idiot not to notice before, but I'd been too absorbed in the music itself.

I hadn't scored any piece lower than 18. And it had been the same with the visual arts. From my 4,000 virtual donors I'd inherited, not the lowest common denominator, but the widest possible taste – and in ten days, I still hadn't imposed any constraints, any preferences, of my own.

All art was sublime to me, and all music. Every kind of food was delicious. Everyone I laid eyes on was a vision of perfection.

Maybe I was just soaking up pleasure wherever I could get it, after my long drought, but it was only a matter of time before I grew sated, and became as discriminating, as focused, as *particular*, as everyone else.

“Should I still be like this? *Omnivorous?*” I blurted out the question, starting with a tone of mild curiosity, ending with an edge of panic.

Tsela halted the sample he'd been playing – a chant that might have been Albanian, Moroccan, or Mongolian for all I knew, but which made hair rise on the back of my neck, and sent my spirits soaring. Just like everything else had.

He was silent for a while, weighing up competing obligations. Then he sighed and said, “You'd better talk to Durrani.”

Durrani showed me a bar graph on the wallscreen in her office: the number of artificial synapses that had changed state within the prosthesis – new connections formed, existing ones broken, weakened or strengthened – for each of the past ten days. The embedded microprocessors kept track of such things, and an antenna waved over my skull each morning collected the data.

Day one had been dramatic, as the prosthesis adapted to its environment; the 4,000 contributing networks might all have been perfectly stable in their owners' skulls, but the Everyman version I'd been given had never been wired up to anyone's brain before.

Day two had seen about half as much activity, day three about a tenth.

From day four on, though, there'd been nothing but background noise. My episodic memories, however pleasurable, were apparently being stored elsewhere – since I certainly wasn't suffering from amnesia – but after the initial burst of activity, the circuitry for defining what pleasure *was* had undergone no change, no refinement at all.

“If any trends emerge in the next few days, we should be able to amplify them, push them forward – like toppling an unstable building, once it's showing signs of falling in a certain direction.” Durrani didn't sound hopeful. Too much time had passed already, and the network wasn't even teetering.

I said, “What about genetic factors? Can't you read my genome, and narrow things down from that?”

She shook her head. “At least 2,000 genes play a role in neural development. It's not like matching a blood group or a tissue type; everyone in the database would have more or less the same small proportion of those genes in common with you. Of course, some people must have been closer to you in temperament than others – but we have no way of identifying them genetically.”

“I see.”

Durrani said carefully, “We could shut the prosthesis down completely, if that's what you want. There'd be no need for surgery – we'd just turn it off, and you'd be back where you started.”

I stared at her luminous face. *How could I go back?* Whatever the tests and the bar graphs said... *how could this be failure?* However much useless beauty I was drowning in, I wasn't as screwed-up as I'd been with a head full of Leu-enkephalin. I was still capable of fear, anxiety, sorrow; the tests had revealed uni-

versal shadows, common to all the donors. Hating Bach or Chuck Berry, Chagal or Paul Klee was beyond me, but I'd reacted as sanely as anyone to images of disease, starvation, death.

And I was not oblivious to my own fate, the way I'd been oblivious to the cancer.

But what was my fate, if I kept using the prosthesis? Universal happiness, universal shadows... half the human race dictating my emotions? In all the years I'd spent in darkness, if I'd held fast to anything, hadn't it been the possibility that I carried a kind of seed within me: a version of myself that might grow into a living person again, given the chance? *And hadn't that hope now proved false?* I'd been offered the stuff of which selves were made – and though I'd tested it all, and admired it all, I'd claimed none of it as my own. All the joy I'd felt in the last ten days had been meaningless. I was just a dead husk, blowing around in other peoples' sunlight.

I said, "I think you should do that. Switch it off."

Durrani held up her hand. "Wait. If you're willing, there is one other thing we could try. I've been discussing it with our ethics committee, and Luke has begun preliminary work on the software... but in the end, it will be your decision."

"To do what?"

"The network can be pushed in any direction. We know how to intervene to do that – to break the symmetry, to make some things a greater source of pleasure than others. Just because it hasn't happened spontaneously, that doesn't mean it can't be achieved by other means."

I laughed, suddenly light-headed. "So if I say the word... *your ethics committee* will choose the music I like, and my favourite foods, and my new vocation? They'll decide who I become?" Would that be so bad? Having died, myself, long ago, to grant life now to a whole new person? To donate, not just a lung or a kidney, but my entire body, irrelevant memories and all, to an arbitrarily constructed – but fully functioning – *de novo* human being?

Durrani was scandalized. "No! We'd never dream of doing that! But we could program the microprocessors to let *you* control the network's refinement. We could give you the power to choose for yourself, consciously and deliberately, the things that make you happy."

De Vries said, "Try to picture the control."

I closed my eyes. He said, "Bad idea. If you get into the habit, it will limit your access."

"Right." I stared into space. Something glorious by Beethoven was playing on the lab's sound system; it was difficult to concentrate. I struggled to visualize the stylized, cherry-red, horizontal slider control that De Vries had constructed, line by line, inside my head five minutes before. Suddenly it was more than a vague memory: it was superimposed over the room again, as clear as any real object, at the bottom of my visual field.

"I've got it." The button was hovering around 19.

De Vries glanced at a display, hidden from me. "Good. Now try to lower the rating."

I laughed weakly. *Roll over Beethoven.* "How? How can you try to like something less?"

"You don't. Just try to move the button to the left. Visualize the movement. The software's monitoring

your visual cortex, tracking any fleeting imaginary perceptions. Fool yourself into seeing the button moving – and the image will oblige."

It did. I kept losing control briefly, as if the thing was sticking, but I managed to manoeuvre it down to 10 before stopping to assess the effect.

"Fuck."

"I take it it's working?"

I nodded stupidly. The music was still... *pleasant*... but the spell was broken completely. It was like listening to an electrifying piece of rhetoric, then realizing half-way through that the speaker didn't believe a word of it – leaving the original poetry and eloquence untouched, but robbing it of all its real force.

I felt sweat break out on my forehead. When Durrani had explained it, the whole scheme had sounded too bizarre to be real. And since I'd already failed to assert myself over the prosthesis – despite billions of direct neural connections, and countless opportunities for the remnants of my identity to interact with the thing and shape it in my own image – I'd feared that when the time came to make a choice, I'd be paralysed by indecision.

But I knew, beyond doubt, that I should *not* have been in a state of rapture over a piece of classical music that I'd either never heard before, or – since apparently it was famous, and ubiquitous – sat through once or twice by accident, entirely unmoved.

And now, in a matter of seconds, I'd hacked that false response away.

There was still hope. I still had a chance to resurrect myself. I'd just have to do it consciously, every step of the way.

De Vries, tinkering with his keyboard, said cheerfully, "I'll colour-code virtual gadgets for all the major systems in the prosthesis. With a few days' practice it'll all be second nature. Just remember that some experiences will engage two or three systems at once... so if you're making love to music that you'd prefer not to find so distracting, make sure you turn down the red control, not the blue." He looked up and saw my face. "Hey, don't worry. You can always turn it up again later if you make a mistake. Or if you change your mind."

—3—

It was nine p.m. in Sydney when the plane touched down. Nine o'clock on a Saturday night. I took a train into the city centre, intending to catch the connecting one home, but when I saw the crowds alighting at Town Hall station I put my suitcase in a locker and followed them up on to the street.

I'd been in the city a few times since the virus, but never at night. I felt as if I'd come home after half a lifetime in another country, after solitary confinement in a foreign gaol. Everything was disorienting, one way or another. I felt a kind of giddy *déjà vu* at the sight of buildings that seemed to have been faithfully preserved, but still weren't quite as I remembered them, and a sense of hollowness each time I turned a corner to find that some private landmark, some shop or sign

I remembered from childhood, had vanished.

I stood outside a pub, close enough to feel my eardrums throb to the beat of the music. I could see people inside, laughing and dancing, sloshing armfuls of drinks around, faces glowing with alcohol and companionship. Some alive with the possibility of violence, others with the promise of sex.

I could step right into this picture myself, now. The ash that had buried the world was gone; I was free to walk wherever I pleased. And I could almost feel the dead cousins of these revellers – re-born now as harmonics of the network, resonating to the music and the sight of their soul-mates – clamouring in my skull, begging me to carry them all the way to the land of the living.

I took a few steps forward, then something in the corner of my vision distracted me. In the alley beside the pub, a boy of 10 or 12 sat crouched against the wall, lowering his face into a plastic bag. After a few inhalations he looked up, dead eyes shining, smiling as blissfully as any orchestra conductor.

I backed away.

Someone touched my shoulder. I spun around and saw a man beaming at me. “Jesus loves you, brother! Your search is over!” He thrust a pamphlet into my hand. I gazed into his face, and his condition was transparent to me: he’d stumbled on a way to produce Leu-enkephalin at will – but he didn’t know it, so he’d reasoned that some divine wellspring of happiness was responsible. I felt my chest tighten with horror and pity. At least I’d known about my tumour. And even the fucked-up kid in the alley understood that he was just sniffing glue.

And the people in the pub? Did they know what they were doing? Music, companionship, alcohol, sex... where did the border lie? When did justifiable happiness turn into something as empty, as pathological, as it was for this man?

I stumbled away, and headed back towards the station. All around me, people were laughing and shouting, holding hands, kissing... and I watched them as if they were flayed anatomical figures, revealing a thousand interlocking muscles working together with effortless precision. Buried inside me, the machinery of happiness recognized itself, again and again.

I had no doubt, now, that Durrani really had packed every last shred of the human capacity for joy into my skull. But to claim any part of it, I’d have to swallow the fact – more deeply than the tumour had ever forced me to swallow it – that happiness itself meant nothing. Life without it was unbearable, but as an end in itself, it was not enough. I was free to choose its causes – and to be happy with my choices – but whatever I felt once I’d bootstrapped my new self into existence, the possibility would remain that all my choices had been wrong.

Global Assurance had given me until the end of the year to get my act together. If my annual psychological assessment showed that Durrani’s treatment had been successful – whether or not I actually had a job – I’d be thrown to the even less tender mercies of the privatized remnants of social security. So I stumbled around in the light, trying to find my bearings.

On my first day back I woke at dawn. I sat down at the phone and started digging. My old net workspace

had been archived; at current rates it was only costing about ten cents a year in storage fees, and I still had \$36.20 credit in my account. The whole bizarre informational fossil had passed intact from company to company through four takeovers and mergers. Working through an assortment of tools to decode the obsolete data formats, I dragged fragments of my past life into the present and examined them, until it became too painful to go on.

The next day I spent 12 hours cleaning the flat, scrubbing every corner – listening to my old *njari* downloads, stopping only to eat, ravenously. And though I could have refined my taste in food back to that of a 12-year-old salt-junky, I made the choice – thoroughly un-masochistic, and more pragmatic than virtuous – to crave nothing more toxic than fruit.

In the following weeks I put on weight with gratifying speed, though when I stared at myself in the mirror, or used morphing software running on the phone, I realized that I could be happy with almost any kind of body. The database must have included people with a vast range of ideal self-images, or who’d died perfectly content with their actual appearances.

Again, I chose pragmatism. I had a lot of catching up to do, and I didn’t want to die at 55 from a heart attack if I could avoid it. There was no point fixating on the unattainable or the absurd, though, so after morphing myself to obesity, and rating it zero, I did the same for the Schwarzenegger look. I chose a lean, wiry body – well within the realms of possibility, according to the software – and assigned it 16 out of 20. Then I started running.

I took it slowly at first, and though I clung to the image of myself as a child, darting effortlessly from street to street, I was careful never to crank up the joy of motion high enough to mask injuries. When I limped into a chemist looking for liniment, I found they were selling something called prostaglandin modulators, anti-inflammatory compounds that allegedly minimized damage without shutting down any vital repair processes. I was sceptical, but the stuff did seem to help; the first month was still painful, but I was neither crippled by natural swelling, nor rendered so oblivious to danger signs that I tore a muscle.

And once my heart and lungs and calves were dragged screaming out of their atrophied state, *it was good*. I ran for an hour every morning, weaving around the local back streets, and on Sunday afternoons I circumnavigated the city itself. I didn’t push myself to attain ever faster times; I had no athletic ambitions whatsoever. I just wanted to exercise my freedom.

Soon the act of running melted into a kind of seamless whole. I could revel in the thudding of my heart and the feeling of my limbs in motion, or I could let those details recede into a buzz of satisfaction and just watch the scenery, as if from a train. And having reclaimed my body, I began to reclaim the suburbs, one by one. From the slivers of forest clinging to the Lane Cove river to the eternal ugliness of Parramatta Road, I criss-crossed Sydney like a mad surveyor, wrapping the landscape with invisible geodesics then drawing it into my skull. I pounded across the bridges at Gladesville and Iron Cove, Pyrmont, Meadowbank, and the Harbour itself, daring the planks to give way beneath my feet.

I suffered moments of doubt. I wasn't drunk on endorphins – I wasn't pushing myself that hard – but it still felt too good to be true. *Was this glue-sniffing?* Maybe 10,000 generations of my ancestors had been rewarded with the same kind of pleasure for pursuing game, fleeing danger, and mapping their territory for the sake of survival, but to me it was all just a glorious pastime.

Still, I wasn't deceiving myself, and I wasn't hurting anyone. I plucked those two rules from the core of the dead child inside me, and kept on running.

Thirty was an interesting age to go through puberty. The virus hadn't literally castrated me, but having eliminated pleasure from sexual imagery, genital stimulation, and orgasm – and having partly wrecked the hormonal regulatory pathways reaching down from the hypothalamus – it had left me with nothing worth describing as sexual function. My body disposed of semen in sporadic joyless spasms – and without the normal lubricants secreted by the prostate during arousal, every unwanted ejaculation tore at the urethral lining.

When all of this changed, it hit hard – even in my state of relative sexual decrepitude. Compared to wet dreams of broken glass, masturbation was wonderful beyond belief, and I found myself unwilling to intervene with the controls to tone it down. But I needn't have worried that it would rob me of interest in the real thing; I kept finding myself staring openly at people on the street, in shops and on trains, until by a combination of willpower, sheer terror, and prosthetic adjustment I managed to kick the habit.

The network had rendered me bisexual, and though I quickly ramped my level of desire down considerably from that of the database's most priapic contributors, when it came to choosing to be straight or gay, everything turned to quicksand. The network was not some kind of population-weighted average; if it had been, Durrani's original hope that my own surviving neural architecture could hold sway would have been dashed whenever the vote was stacked against it. So I was not just 10 or 15 per cent gay; the two possibilities were present with equal force, and the thought of eliminating *either* felt as alarming, as disfiguring, as if I'd lived with both for decades.

But was that just the prosthesis defending itself, or was it partly my own response? I had no idea. I'd been a thoroughly asexual 12-year-old, even before the virus; I'd always assumed that I was straight, and I'd certainly found some girls attractive, but there'd been no moon-struck stares or furtive groping to back up that purely aesthetic opinion. I looked up the latest research, but all the genetic claims I recalled from various headlines had since been discredited – so even if my sexuality had been determined from birth, there was no blood test that could tell me, now, what it would have become. I even tracked down my pre-treatment MRI scans, but they lacked the resolution to provide a direct, neuroanatomical answer.

I didn't want to be bisexual. I was too old to experiment like a teenager; I wanted certainty, I wanted solid foundations. I wanted to be monogamous – and even if monogamy was rarely an effortless state for anyone, that was no reason to lumber myself with unnecessary obstacles. *So who should I slaughter?* I knew which



choice would make things easier... but if everything came down to a question of which of the 4,000 donors could carry me along the path of least resistance, whose life would I be living?

Maybe it was all a moot point. I was a 30-year-old virgin with a history of mental illness, no money, no prospects, no social skills – and I could always crank up the satisfaction level of my only current option, and let everything else recede into fantasy. I wasn't deceiving myself, I wasn't hurting anyone. It was within my power to want nothing more.

I'd noticed the bookshop, tucked away in a back street in Leichhardt, many times before. But one Sunday in June, when I jogged past and saw a copy of *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil in the front window, I had to stop and laugh.

I was drenched in sweat from the winter humidity, so I didn't go in and buy the book. But I peered in through the display towards the counter, and spotted a HELP WANTED sign.

Looking for unskilled work had seemed futile; the total unemployment rate was 15 per cent, the youth rate three times higher, so I'd assumed there'd always be a thousand other applicants for every job: younger, cheaper, stronger, and certifiably sane. But though I'd resumed my on-line education, I was getting not so much nowhere, fast as everywhere, slowly. All the fields of knowledge that had gripped me as a child had expanded a hundredfold, and while the prosthesis granted me limitless energy and enthusiasm, there was still too much ground for anyone to cover in a lifetime. I knew I'd have to sacrifice 90 per cent of my interests if I was ever going to choose a career, but I still hadn't been able to wield the knife.

I returned to the bookshop on Monday, walking up from Petersham station. I'd fine-tuned my confidence for the occasion, but it rose spontaneously when I heard that there'd been no other applicants. The owner was in his 60s, and he'd just done his back in; he wanted someone to lug boxes around, and take the counter when he was otherwise occupied. I told him the truth: I'd been neurologically damaged by a childhood illness, and I'd only recently recovered.

He hired me on the spot, for a month's trial. The starting wage was exactly what Global Assurance were paying me, but if I was taken on permanently I'd get slightly more.

The work wasn't hard, and the owner didn't mind me reading in the back room when I had nothing to do. In a way, I was in heaven – 10,000 books, and no access fees – but sometimes I felt the terror of dissolution returning. I read voraciously, and on one level I could make clear judgments: I could pick the clumsy writers from the skilled, the honest from the fakers, the platitudinous from the inspired. But the prosthesis still wanted me to enjoy everything, to embrace everything, to diffuse out across the dusty shelves until I was no one at all, a ghost in the Library of Babel.

She walked into the bookshop two minutes after opening time, on the first day of spring. Watching her browse, I tried to think clearly through the consequences of what I was about to do. For weeks I'd been

on the counter five hours a day, and with all that human contact I'd been hoping for... *something*. Not wild, reciprocated love at first sight, just the tiniest flicker of mutual interest, the slightest piece of evidence that I could actually desire one human being more than all the rest.

It hadn't happened. Some customers had flirted mildly, but I could see that it was nothing special, just their own kind of politeness – and I'd felt nothing more in response than if they'd been unusually, formally, courteous. And though I might have agreed with any bystander as to who was conventionally good-looking, who was animated or mysterious, witty or charming, who glowed with youth or radiated worldliness... I just didn't care. The 4,000 had all loved very different people, and the envelope that stretched between their far-flung characteristics encompassed the entire species. That was never going to change, until I did something to break the symmetry myself.

So for the past week, I'd dragged all the relevant systems in the prosthesis down to 3 or 4. People had become scarcely more interesting to watch than pieces of wood. Now, alone in the shop with this randomly chosen stranger, I slowly turned the controls up. I had to fight against positive feedback; the higher the settings, the more I wanted to increase them, but I'd set limits in advance, and I stuck to them.

By the time she'd chosen two books and approached the counter, I was feeling half defiantly triumphant, half sick with shame. I'd struck a pure note with the network at last; what I felt at the sight of this woman rang true. And if everything I'd done to achieve it was calculated, artificial, bizarre and abhorrent... I'd had no other way.

I was smiling as she bought the books, and she smiled back warmly. No wedding or engagement ring – but I'd promised myself that I wouldn't try anything, no matter what. This was just the first step: to notice someone, to make someone stand out from the crowd. I could ask out the tenth, the hundredth woman who bore some passing resemblance to her.

I said, "Would you like to meet for a coffee sometime?"

She looked surprised, but not affronted. Indecisive, but at least slightly pleased to have been asked. And I thought I was prepared for this slip of the tongue to lead nowhere, but then something in the ruins of me sent a shaft of pain through my chest as I watched her make up her mind. If a fraction of that had shown on my face, she probably would have rushed me to the nearest vet to be put down.

She said, "That would be nice. I'm Julia, by the way."

"I'm Mark." We shook hands.

"When do you finish work?"

"Tonight? Nine o'clock."

"Ah."

I said, "How about lunch? When do you have lunch?"

"One." She hesitated. "There's that place just down the road... next to the hardware store?"

"That would be great."

Julia smiled. "Then I'll meet you there. About ten past. OK?"

I nodded. She turned and walked out. I stared after her, dazed, terrified, elated. I thought: This is simple. Anyone in the world can do it. It's like breathing.

I started hyperventilating. I was an emotionally retarded teenager, and she'd discover that in five minutes flat. Or, worse, discover the 4,000 grown men in my head offering advice.

I went into the toilet to throw up.

Julia told me that she managed a dress shop a few blocks away. "You're new at the bookshop, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So what were you doing before that?"

"I was unemployed. For a long time."

"How long?"

"Since I was a student."

She grimaced. "It's criminal, isn't it? Well, I'm doing my bit. I'm job-sharing, half-time only."

"Really? How are you finding it?"

"It's wonderful. I mean, I'm lucky, the position's well enough paid that I can get by on half a salary." She laughed. "Most people assume I must be raising a family. As if that's the only possible reason."

"You just like to have the time?"

"Yes. Time's important. I hate being rushed."

We had lunch again two days later, and then twice again the next week. She talked about the shop, a trip she'd made to South America, a sister recovering from breast cancer. I almost mentioned my own long-vanquished tumour, but apart from fears about where that might lead, it would have sounded too much like a plea for sympathy. At home, I sat riveted to the phone – not waiting for a call, but watching news broadcasts, to be sure I'd have something to talk about besides myself. *Who's your favourite singer/author/artist/actor? I have no idea.*

Visions of Julia filled my head. I wanted to know what she was doing every second of the day; I wanted her to be happy, I wanted her to be safe. *Why?* Because I'd chosen her. But... why had I felt compelled to choose anyone? Because in the end, the one thing that most of the donors must have had in common was the fact that they'd desired, and cared about, one person above all others. *Why?* That came down to evolution. You could no more help and protect everyone in sight than you could fuck them, and a judicious combination of the two had obviously proved effective at passing down genes. So my emotions had the same ancestry as everyone else's; what more could I ask?

But how could I pretend that I felt anything real for Julia, when I could shift a few buttons in my head, anytime, and make those feelings vanish? Even if what I felt was strong enough to keep me from wanting to touch that dial...

Some days I thought: it must be like this for everyone. People make a decision, half-shaped by chance, to get to know someone; everything starts from there. Some nights I sat awake for hours, wondering if I was turning myself into a pathetic slave, or a dangerous obsessive. Could anything I discovered about Julia drive me away, now that I'd chosen her? Or even trigger the slightest disapproval? And if, when, she decided to break things off, how would I take it?

We went out to dinner, then shared a taxi home. I kissed her goodnight on her doorstep. Back in my flat, I flipped through sex manuals on the net, wondering how I could ever hope to conceal my complete lack of

experience. Everything looked anatomically impossible; I'd need six years of gymnastics training just to achieve the missionary position. I'd refused to masturbate since I'd met her; to fantasize about her, to *imagine her* without consent, seemed outrageous, unforgivable. After I gave in, I lay awake until dawn trying to comprehend the trap I'd dug for myself, and trying to understand why I didn't want to be free.

Julia bent down and kissed me, sweetly. "That was a nice idea." She climbed off me and flopped onto the bed.

I'd spent the last ten minutes riding the blue control, trying to keep myself from coming without losing my erection. I'd heard of computer games involving exactly the same thing. Now I turned up the indigo for a stronger glow of intimacy – and when I looked into her eyes, I knew that she could see the effect on me. She brushed my cheek with her hand. "You're a sweet man. Did you know that?"

I said, "I have to tell you something." *Sweet? I'm a puppet, I'm a robot, I'm a freak.*

"What?"

I couldn't speak. She seemed amused, then she kissed me. "I know you're gay. That's all right; I don't mind."

"I'm not gay." *Any more?* "Though I might have been."

Julia frowned. "Gay, bisexual... I don't care. Honestly."

I wouldn't have to manipulate my responses much longer; the prosthesis was being shaped by all of this, and in a few weeks I'd be able to leave it to its own devices. Then I'd feel, as naturally as anyone, all the things I was now having to choose.

I said, "When I was 12, I had cancer."

I told her everything. I watched her face, and saw horror, then growing doubt. "You don't believe me?"

She replied haltingly, "You sound so matter-of-fact. *Eighteen years?* How can you just say, 'I lost 18 years'?"

"How do you want me to say it? I'm not trying to make you pity me. I just want you to understand."

When I came to the day I met her, my stomach tightened with fear, but I kept on talking. After a few seconds I saw tears in her eyes, and I felt as though I'd been knifed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." I didn't know whether to try to hold her, or to leave right then. I kept my eyes fixed on her, but the room swam.

She smiled. "What are you sorry about? You chose me. I chose you. It could have been different for both of us. But it wasn't." She reached down under the sheet and took my hand. "It wasn't."

Julia had Saturdays off, but I had to start work at eight. She kissed me goodbye sleepily when I left at six; I walked all the way home, weightless.

I must have grinned inanely at everyone who came into the shop, but I hardly saw them. I was picturing the future. I hadn't spoken to either of my parents for nine years, they didn't even know about the Durrani treatment. But now it seemed possible to repair anything. I could go to them now and say: *This is your son, back from the dead. You did save my life, all those years ago.*

There was a message on the phone from Julia when I arrived home. I resisted viewing it until I'd started things cooking on the stove; there was something per-

versely pleasurable about forcing myself to wait, imagining her face and her voice in anticipation.

I hit the PLAY button. Her face wasn't quite as I'd pictured it.

I kept missing things and stopping to rewind. Isolated phrases stuck in my mind. *Too strange. Too sick. No one's fault.* My explanation hadn't really sunk in the night before. But now she'd had time to think about it, and she wasn't prepared to carry on a relationship with 4,000 dead men.

I sat on the floor, trying to decide what to feel: the wave of pain crashing over me, or something better, by choice. I knew I could summon up the controls of the prosthesis and make myself happy – happy because I was “free” again, happy because I was better off without her... happy because Julia was better off without me. Or even just happy because happiness meant nothing, and all I had to do to attain it was flood my brain with Leu-enkephalin.

I sat there wiping tears and mucous off my face while the vegetables burned. The smell made me think of cauterization, sealing off a wound.

I let things run their course, I didn't touch the controls – but just knowing that I could have changed everything. And I realized then that, even if I went to Luke De Vries and said: I'm cured now, take the software away, I don't want the power to choose any more... I'd never be able to forget where everything I felt had come from.

My father came to the flat yesterday. We didn't talk

much, but he hasn't re-married yet, and he made a joke about us going nightclub-hopping together.

At least I hope it was a joke.

Watching him, I thought: he's there inside my head, and my mother too, and ten million ancestors, human, proto-human, remote beyond imagining. What difference did 4,000 more make? Everyone had to carve a life out of the same legacy: half universal, half particular; half sharpened by relentless natural selection, half softened by the freedom of chance. I'd just had to face the details a little more starkly.

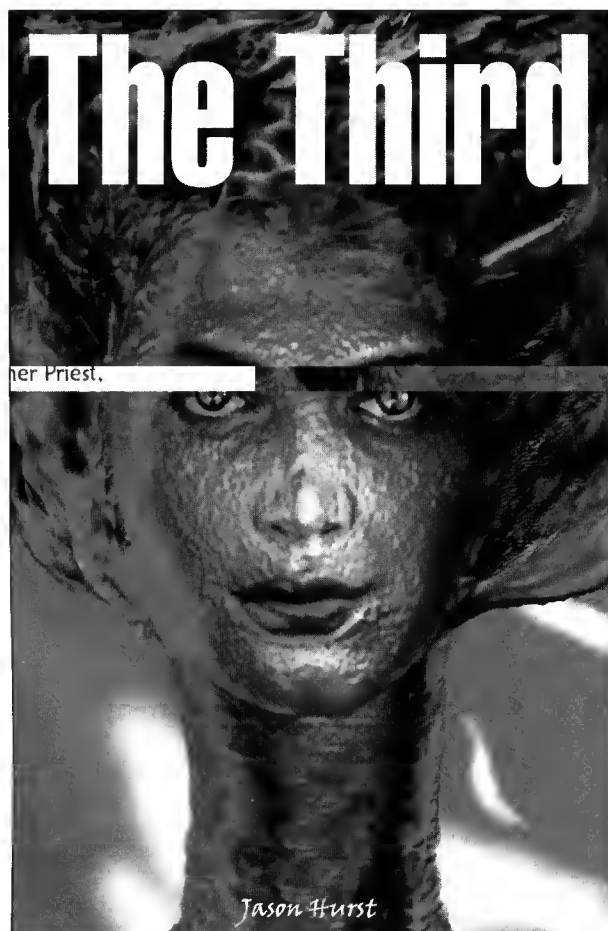
And I could go on doing it, walking the convoluted border between meaningless happiness and meaningless despair. Maybe I was lucky; maybe the best way to cling to that narrow zone was to see clearly what lay on either side.

When my father was leaving, he looked out from the balcony across the crowded suburb, down towards the Parramatta river, where a storm drain was discharging a visible plume of oil, street litter and garden runoff into the water.

He asked dubiously, “You happy with this area?”

I said, “I like it here.”

Greg Egan, who lives in Perth, Australia, has a fourth sf novel, *Diaspora*, due out in September 1997. His previous books have won him a growing reputation as one of the best sf writers in the world (the English language's Stanislaw Lem?). His most recent stories in *Interzone* were “Mitochondrial Eve” (issue 92), “Mister Volition” (issue 100) and “Silver Fire” (issue 102).



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1996 BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER

James Lovegrove

interviewed by

Peter Crowther

With the U.S. publication by Tor Books of their collaborative novel, Escardy Gap (1996), Peter Crowther and James Lovegrove, both of them regular contributors to the pages of Interzone, got together recently to begin work on a sequel. We persuaded them to take some time out to interview each other. Here's the result.

Peter Crowther interviewed by **James Lovegrove**

Pete Crowther admits to having two real interests throughout all of his work: death, and the concept of a divine intelligence watching and guiding all that we do.

A brush with cancer a few years ago has made him sanguine about the former, and what lies beyond.

"People tend to treat the afterlife as something terrifically mystical, but maybe the reality will turn out to be no more mystical than a chrysalis turning into a butterfly."

As for God: "Perhaps we're all gods to somebody or something," he says. "Anyone who keeps a cat or a dog – certainly anyone who keeps a goldfish – is probably regarded as a god by those creatures."

The idea of our finny friends holding services at their little pink ceramic castles to worship the entity beyond the bowl and pray for more fish-flakes and cleaner water is an intriguing one. It's also just the sort of thing you might expect to find in one of Pete's short stories. His initials notwithstanding, Pete is hardly the most "PC" of authors, and his disrespect for the orthodoxies and perceived wisdoms that circumscribe many people's lives

often borders on the savage. As far as Pete is concerned, all sacred cows have BSE. At the same time, though, he likes to keep an open mind, particularly about matters spiritual.

"I'm willing to look beneath the smoke to see if there's a fire," he says. "I'm not a religious person, I don't go to church, but I have as little time for people who say they don't believe as I do for those who say that they do. I feel the same way about fairies, UFOs and the Perfect Pint of Guinness. I suppose you could say I'm just optimistic."

Ironically, given that he hedges his bets on the Big Cosmic Question, Pete is profoundly superstitious. "If I see one magpie, I'll spit three times." A demonstration of this practice proves to be nowhere near as unhygienic as it sounds – a soft triple clearing of the throat accompanied by a hand ges-



Peter Crowther
(left) and **James Lovegrove**

ture – but it shows how easily such practices can insinuate themselves into our lives and permeate the brain to become unconscious reflexes.

“I also touch wood all the time, even though I know it’s supposed to refer to the Cross,” he admits, somewhat sheepishly. “I don’t think of the Cross at all when I do it, but I’ve assimilated the habit into my repertoire all the same. I’m very suggestible where superstitions are concerned.”

Little wonder, then, that Pete has edited three anthologies based around the theme of superstition: the *Narrow Houses* series. The last of these, *Blue Motel*, he counts as a personal favourite. “I like *Blue Motel* because, of all the anthologies I’ve been involved with, it comes closest to the feel of the old *Saturday Evening Post*. In that magazine you could find different types of story all rubbing shoulders together: science fiction, then comedy, then a crime story, then a small-town kid saga, then something else. I like that sort of eclecticism.”

For the opposite reason, because of their uniform feel in respect to content rather than to tone, his close runners-up for favourite are *Heaven Sent* (stories about angels) and *Dante’s Disciples* (stories about Hell), anthologies he co-edited with Martin Greenberg and Ed Kramer respectively.

The way Pete slips mention of the *Saturday Evening Post* into his conversation reminds one that it is no secret that he is a passionate devotee of all things American. “Maybe it’s something to do with being born on the fourth of July,” he jokes. In fact, in the five years since he began actively writing, most of Pete’s 50-plus story sales have gone direct to U.S. markets, and he even has a series character who is a New York-based private eye, unusual for a British author.

“Right from as far back as I can remember, I was always interested in America and Americana. I can remember watching *Amos and Andy* on my nana’s TV, and all the books, magazines and comics I read were American. I wasn’t interested in the British stuff. But I don’t think that the America I was reading about actually existed to the degree that it was portrayed as existing in the various media. The 1950s in particular are portrayed as an idyllic time, but it’s probably all rose-tinted spectacles. It was really quite a paranoia-riddled era. The Cold War, the Korean War, McCarthyism, fear of the Bomb...”

An era, in fact, ripe for fictional exploration, and this is exactly what Pete has done in partnership with myself, in a novel called *Escardy Gap*, published by Tor Books in late 1996.

The project came about as a result of one of several springboard ideas Pete included in the flyer for his first superstition anthology, *Narrow Houses*. I spotted immediately that

this particular idea seemed to have been aimed specifically at Ray Bradbury, and said as much to Pete. He owned up, adding that, since Bradbury had agreed to contribute a poem rather than a story to the book, the idea was still up for grabs. I suggested a way to conclude the tale, Pete suggested that we write it together, and, as he puts it, “150,000 words later the thing dragged itself across the finishing line, breathless and waving a white handkerchief.”

Escardy Gap, Pete freely admits, owes a certain amount to Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, inasmuch as it features a train arriving in a small, out-of-the-way, idyllic mid-Western town, with the passengers turning out to be decidedly unpleasant types. But there the debt to Bradbury – to whose work Pete was introduced by an English teacher at school (just as I was introduced to it by the English teacher at my school) – is paid, and what follows is a post-modernist deconstruction of American myth and the literary tradition of the “dark carnival.” Or, in less academic parlance, a rollercoaster ride of madness, mania and mayhem.

The novel also takes in Pete’s two primary preoccupations. There is death aplenty throughout, and the question of a divine Creator is explored by means of a framing sequence which follows the progress of a scabrous, burned-out, alcoholic author in modern-day New York as he writes a book also bearing the title *Escardy Gap*. Gradually, the worlds of the framing sequence and the book-within-a-book begin to overlap, until, according to Pete, “the reader begins to ask himself: *Who is the Creator and who the Createe? Where is the line drawn? Where does the cycle end?*” All, as they say, will be revealed... and Pete and I have already begun work on a follow-up to develop the concept still further.

Meanwhile, Pete has two solo books on the stocks. The first, *The Longest Single Note* (subtitle: *And Other Strange Compositions*), collects some 80,000 words from the almost 200,000 words of short fiction that Pete has had published since his first professional sales to *Dark Voices 4* and *Darklands 2*. A further 100,000-plus words of short story are scheduled for publication over the next year or so, and he’s still churning them out. In fact, the short form is where Pete is at his happiest.

Not surprisingly, making a representative selection for the collection was no easy task. “I’ve not simply picked out what I think are the best stories because that changes virtually from day to day,” he says. “I just picked them more or less in the order they appeared, leaving out all the mystery and crime stories, and then rearranged them into an order that seemed to provide some kind of com-

plementary structure. A lot of collections don’t seem to do that, or maybe what seems complementary to the writer doesn’t have the same effect for the reader.” Pete’s stories have several times been given honourable mentions – and twice been included – in Year’s Best anthologies, and he has been nominated three times for a Bram Stoker Award.

Pete is also in the process of completing *April Fool*, a novel he has been working on around his other projects.

“Basically, *April Fool* concerns an autistic child born on April 1st,” he explains. “I’ve known a few people with such children and, in the brief time I’ve spent in their company, I’ve become increasingly convinced that there’s more to them than actually meets the eye. It’s too easy – and crass – simply to say, *The lights are on but nobody’s home*. Perhaps there are things happening behind the shutters that we can’t even begin to imagine.

“So I decided to explore what would happen if one of these children were able to project his mind, initially around the Earth, and ultimately out into space. The child in *April Fool* manages this and projects to a planet where he is able to communicate mentally with one sector of the indigenous population. To them, he is a god... which is, of course, a great cosmic joke because back on Earth he is considered to be a cretin. I quite like the suggestion it makes – namely that, if you extrapolate this theory backward, maybe our own God, if there is one, is considered to be a cretin in His/Her/Its world.”

You can just see those sacred cows staggering around on unsteady legs and lowing furiously, can’t you?

James Lovegrove

James Lovegrove interviewed by Peter Crowther

According to the man himself, James Lovegrove got into writing on leaving university simply because he had nothing better to do. But don’t you believe it.

Such *bon mots* of self-effacement roll thick and fast off James’s tongue, and a modicum of salt is required in order to appreciate them fully.

Witness: “While at university, I won a short-story competition. The prize money – £15 – was less than it cost me to have the thing professionally typed. Already the economics of writing were becoming clear to me...”

And: “Six weeks after James Hale [then a senior editor at Macmillan] accepted *The Hope* for publication, he resigned. I like to think that the two events weren’t connected.”

James’s tongue-in-cheek reflections aside, Hale’s departure from Macmillan as *The Hope* was about to enter pre-production did little for the

book's progress. Despite some glowing reviews – not least in the *Sunday Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Spectator* – the book, an everyday tale of a city-sized ship, written as a collection of interlinked short stories and intended as an allegory of late-20th-century existence, bounced onto an unsuspecting market with all the energy of an overripe fruit. A distinct case, if ever there were one, of pearls before swine.

But not everyone was quite so overwhelmed by the book, as James recalls.

"Mark Morris read it and liked it, and came down to London to interview me for *Fear* magazine. We got on well, corresponded for a while, and then he invited me to a party at his home in Leeds."

The party was to be something of a turning point – or perhaps a derailment – on James's literary journey, in that he met me.

"I remember that we talked almost immediately about Ray Bradbury, in whom we both had and still do have a deep and abiding interest," James recalls.

That interest had already led, on James's part, to a thesis on the writer for his Oxbridge entrance exam.

"It was only during my last term at school, after some encouraging words from one of the more radical English teachers, that I came to understand that sf was a valid form of literature," he says. "It wasn't just mind-rotting trash you indulged in furtively when you weren't reading 'proper' literature; it could actually be used to address issues and moral debates which are relevant to us now. It's a vehicle which can be used to discuss society's problems, which is what I was trying to do with *The Hope*."

James is far from being purely an sf fan, though he does feel that it has more to offer than any other literary form, particularly fantasy and horror.

"Ballard is on record as saying that the English domestic novel is a literary cul-de-sac, and that's true also for both fantasy and horror. I've never really 'got' fantasy – I mean fantasy in its purest sense, Tolkien and his legions of imitators, not Jonathan Carroll and the like, whom I would class as mainstream writers. It's never really appealed to me, and as for horror, well, I read a lot of it as a kid but, like so many of the things we enjoy as children, I've outgrown it. I find the horror fiction of today repetitive, derivative and dull."

Stephen King, though, James considers an exception.

"I don't think King is really writing horror these days," he avers. "He's doing his own thing – he's a genre unto himself – and to compare his work with what other horror authors are doing is not really appropriate. King is writing real-life stories which just happen to contain elements of the

fantastic; stories that are, particularly in their fine dissection of human characteristics and small-town life, painfully true. A great talent."

My first meeting with James led to my inviting him to do a story for the first volume of *Narrow Houses* and, some five or six months later, to our embarking on the collaborative short story (initially intended as an homage to Bradbury) which was to take the best part of a year to complete.

Meanwhile, James's solo career received a long spell on "pause," with two novels failing to pass his own rigorous quality control. Nevertheless, a slow but high-calibre stream of stories did continue, and I took four more of these for various anthology projects while another half dozen went to other outlets.

"I'm not very good at writing stories on a whim," he confesses. "If someone presents me with a commission or a specific theme, then that usually triggers something. Unfortunately, I'm one of these people who need to know that what they're working on is actually going to see print. This might explain my delay in following up *The Hope*, although I draw comfort from the fact that there were seven years between Vonnegut's first two novels.

"In that respect, *Escardy Gap* came along at just the right time because it meant that I didn't have to rely solely on myself. There was someone with whom I could bash out ideas and make them better. The best thing about writing is also the worst thing: sitting alone in a room, trying to come up with something to fill that blank sheet of paper."

But James did manage to fill a few of those sheets all on his own, and 1997 will see the release of *Days*, in which he does for big shops what he has already done for big ships. The basic premise for the book had been rattling around inside James's head for some time, but it was while he was trying to break into scripting comics that things finally gelled.

"I had been working on various comics-related projects with an incredibly talented artist by the name of Adam Brockbank, but we were being dogged by bad luck. For instance, shortly after Marvel's UK branch commissioned a series from us, the parent company closed them down. It was around then that I had the idea of converting my notes on this huge shop into a graphic treatment, and that seemed to unlock it as a novel."

James turned the treatment into a full synopsis and submitted it to White Wolf, the Atlanta-based publisher, where Stewart Wieck took the bait and commissioned the novel as the follow-up to White Wolf's US edition of *The Hope*.

But big shops?

"*Days* takes place over the course of a single day in the life of a huge department store," James explains,

"or rather a single day in the life of one of its employees, Frank, who is a Ghost, which is the in-store nickname for a store detective."

The gun-toting Frank (apparently *Days* customers can get a bit rowdy) is losing his grip on reality. As a result of his long career of lingering unobtrusively on the sidelines, he feels he is starting to fade out of existence and becoming a real ghost. Not surprisingly, as his day progresses things get worse.

"The book is set in the future, although it could be today. There's no technology in it that isn't in existence or feasible now," James says. "And in this 'future' every continent has at least one of these huge stores, these gigastores, and *Days* is England's version. The store is run by seven brothers, each of whom was named after a day of the week by their father. They exist in splendid isolation on the top floor of the building, literally 'above the shop,' and part of the book concerns their disconnectedness with what goes on below them. In that respect, *Days* echoes some of the sentiments in *Escardy Gap*, in that the brothers are like gods in a lofty Olympus, presiding over a world where they don't actually know what's going on and have no awareness of the consequences of their own actions."

Plans are already under way for a new novel called *The Foreigners*, which expands on James's short story "Giving and Taking" in *Interzone* 104 last year.

"I hope to get started on that by the time the second book of *Escardy Gap* (tentatively titled *Unfinished Business*) is nearing completion. *The Foreigners* will involve a lot of research, which is something I don't really enjoy. I usually try to get away with as little as possible but this time I don't think I'm going to be able to wing it."

Talking of foreigners, James recently relocated to Chicago.

"The move wasn't planned," he says. "Nothing I ever do is. I met an American woman, fell in love, and, rather than spend £700 every quarter on telephone bills, as I was doing, it seemed more sensible to buy a plane ticket and go and live there. It's been helpful, too, in dealing with the U.S. publishers doing my books. And, of course, it was a bit of a pilgrimage to be able to go to Illinois, where Bradbury was born. Needless to say, it's nothing like the way I imagined it: it's all strip malls, freeways and suburban developments. It seems like all of America is becoming the same and the small towns that I love to read about – and, in *Escardy Gap*, have written about – are losing their sense of individual identity, becoming engulfed by a slow-spreading tide of homogeneity. I often wonder what Bradbury must think about that."

EveryWHEN

Dominic Green

Welcome to Everywhen, popular dumping ground for the entire universe. Welcome to Sargasso City, the bad end of Everywhen. And welcome to the Malky Way, the worst bar for a Bem to visit in Sargasso. Don't worry about the "Bem," by the way. Here, it means something like "Honky" used to mean back on Earth. But of course, I'm forgetting, you won't know that. You're a Bem. B.E.M., you see? Come over to the bar, sit down, have a drink.

My name is Huyghens, by the way. I'm human. That's second spiral arm, Local Group, 15,000 million years post-Bang to you. We didn't last long. Apparently sometime around 3,000 AD, our time, we discovered a way to make our sun go nova. Bipedal, carbon-based, oxygen-breathing, give birth to live young, only carnivorous to a limited extent, don't let the teeth alarm you. I run a human restaurant in People Street; that's a different sort of human restaurant to the ones run by Altairean Mandrills, by the way. We first met, and made immediate war on, the Mandrills in our year 2580. They didn't take prisoners, at least except in the sense that they only eat live food.

There's been a shortage of human foodstuffs lately. We used to grow rice, real Old-Earth rice, out in the Big Tree delta, but the import of the Pterran Rice Beetle two years ago decimated our fields. It doesn't work that way for diseases, luckily. It takes a lot for them to cross the species barrier, otherwise I wouldn't be talking to you, what with you having all those orifices and all.

The Carnelians run the place at the moment, same sort of thing as usual, bust out of Avernus in one of them huge all-conquering warfleets, threatened to annihilate everybody, rubbed out the last lot to be in charge – some sort of intelligent cephalopods last week, I think it was – and moved to the top of the dunghill. Made everyone learn Carnelian, taught everyone the Carnelian version of history, etcetera, etcetera. In any case, they're better than the Sophocephs, since they communicate by changing colour and they're deaf as posts, so

they can't tell whether we're talking out loud or not, and they can hardly arrest me for subversive breathing. I'll give them about a week or so. The real grafters here are the middlemen, the civil service Nectarines, or woss-name. We humans and Chirrupers and Strange Blue Elephant Creatures will always be here running the show.

Have another drink. No, I insist. Which hole do I pour it in?

I've been here about 189 years. I'm actually older than my people normally get, which is down to Strange Blue Elephant Creature medical technology. I've been married 29 times. I have over 300 children. That might not sound a lot to you, I dunno, you might lay spawn at the bottom of ponds or something, but it's quite impressive as People go. We also call ourselves People, by the way. I suppose you do too. Panjandrums, isn't that what they call you? New kids, fell through two days ago, yes?

I fell out of Avernus in our year 2591. We'd just discovered Avernus, and I was ship's cook on board the Golden Bough, one of our first person-carrying vessels through the Singularity. We weren't supposed to return, like a colony vessel, or a missile. We carried seeds, and foodstuffs, and weapons. Y'see, if you approach the Singularity from the side, as every school-juvenile knows, you shoot out somewhere in the past or future. When we discovered Avernus, we used it for instantaneous space travel. Because it moves at a different speed to the stars around it, it drifts around the Milky Way like a giant cosmic shuttle service, just waiting for travellers to board it. If you know Avernus is going to be at a certain star in five million years' time, you time the angle of your approach to the singularity to take you five million years into the future, and there you are, at Arcturus in time for breakfast.

But if you dive in from above –

Nobody knew quite where you'd end up. Some said you'd be crushed and die, some said you'd shoot out into a negative, antigravity universe, or a "pocket universe," or be squirted out a white hole in space. Our Wise Guys

orbited satellites around Avernus's poles and fired test lasers into it and made calculations and ommed and aahed to all the cosmic gods you could think of for the answer, but in the end there was only one way anyone could really find out, and that was by going through. Supreme test of faith. What we found on the other side was what you'd logically expect to find on the other side, if you thought about it. If a ship could fall through relatively undamaged, anything else could, after a highly radioactive and gravity-torn fashion. Matter passing through Avernus was squashed hard enough to turn a carbonaceous asteroid into a diamond, and that diamond into a neutronium mote. We came out into a cold world of hard radiation, peopled by small, dense masses: protostars, neutron starlets, tiny white dwarfs that had once been supergiants sucked through Avernus's maw. It was inside a cluster of these white dwarfs that Everywhen, the only planet in the sub-universe, was orbiting.

It was the Pachies – the Strange Blue Elephantoids – that found it first, you know. Oh, there had been dead ships, crashed on the surface and floating round the various stars – even some dead cities, cobbled together out of starship hull-plating and all overgrown with Everywhen weeds. But their owners were long gone. The Pachies were the first to come here and survive. They turned the world from a CO₂ furnace into a living breathing planet almost like Pachie Prime, or whatever it is they call their place of origin, with clear red skies, and huge blue flowers that followed the sun round the sky (and became highly confused here, since we have six suns). But terraforming, or pachyforming, of course, takes time; before the Pachies could finish their project, the Ovoids arrived, took things over and built their own squat, functional atmosphere reprocessing towers to turn the sky properly yellow. Then the Selkies arrived and decided they wanted the sky black. You get the picture. Because terraforming takes time, no one ever had time to finish what they'd begun, and by now the sky doesn't know what colour to be. If there's a hell, you know, we're in it. Characteristics of hell are the same as this place – you never come out. Talk about rolling a rock uphill forever – gravity's two-fifths as high again here as it is back home. Some low-grav races spend most of their time in bed and the bath.

Avernus hasn't always been in the same elliptical orbit, rolling round the galaxy chewing up stars. But it's been there for over 2,000 million years. And during all that time, things and people have been falling into it out of the future, out of the past, from this side of the galaxy or another. Space-time, don't forget, is different here – a black hole like Avernus chews up space-time and spits it out in bloody ribbons. Space-time doesn't just punch through neatly, like a nice clean Einsteinian rubber sheet; it rips, shreds and tears. I know. I've been through it. Of course, you have too, but I hear your people were in cryogenic suspension when they came through. You don't know what it's like. Every centimetre of the ship was unusable when we drifted out; every hull-panel breached, every conduit broken. I myself grew over 13 millimetres in height. Our glorious captain, "Mendacious" Mendoza, claimed that the length of his manhood had been cruelly increased by tidal forces. Not wishing to demand proof, I had no option but to believe

him.

Of course, you realize, sitting down next to me could have been a big mistake.

Of all the hundred-odd races that fall out of the sky, the most frightening of all is the one that looks most like People. The Oni look identical to human beings, but for all the wrong reasons. They evolved from bipedal running creatures that took to the trees when forest began to cover the savannahs of their homeworld. They have no body-hair because they originally evolved to run down their prey over incredible distances; a hairless skin contains more sweat glands, and its owner can run faster and further on a hot day. If you imagine the simile, we met them on our way down from the trees; as fast as we were coming down from monkeydom, they were scrambling to get up to it. They are carnivores who have adapted to eat the occasional piece of plant matter; we are herbivores who've adapted to carnivory. And they think like carnivores; their most basic, brain-stem-deep emotions are to kill, and take, and plunder. The only reason why the Oni don't look like fearsome carnivores with big baby-gobbling jaws is because they don't need jaws; they kill their prey with folding fangs which release a paralytic and catalytic venom to which they are, of course, immune. Then they stand back like two-legged spiders and wait for their prey to die as he or she is slowly dissolved from the inside. They also lay their eggs in the living and paralysed bodies of their victims. Ask anyone here if you don't believe me. This means their women – they have two sexes, just like us – never grow fat or pregnant, and remain youthful and devilishly unpleasant for their entire lives long, like the Devil Dolls they are, and live only to lure young impressionable human males into the bedroom to be bitten where it hurts most –

"Ahhh, Madame Xede't! How pleasant to see you there behind me. Allow me to buy you an... OOF."

"Your conversation disgusts me, Huyghens. You greatly resemble a small, somewhat pathetic distant relative of our species on which we prey on my birth-world. Are you aware of this?"

"OOF. Madame Xede't, I fear our somewhat subtle human humour loses something in translation... OW –"

"– Why, I oughtta tear you apart! That creature you are feeding liquor to is unintelligent, by the way. A ship's pet. The real Panjandran is sitting over in the corner and has been looking at you rather oddly for the last half hour. In any case; the time has come to talk of many things, O osculator of the genital organs of members of your own species and gender –"

"– AARGH. The obscenity section on your translator is not as idiomatic as it might be – perhaps I might fine-tune it for you if you might stop banging my head against the wall... HNNGK –"

"Very well. You will please tell me the current whereabouts of Mohandas Svensson, formerly of 15 Milky Way, Sargasso Human District, or I will buffet you."

"Svensson? But he's dead, he died fifty years ago – OUCH!"

"I am sorry, I am constant as the northern star. Thou liest. Mr Svensson is hip and hoppin'. He has been seen, albeit floating several feet above the ground, on videophone answering machine messages left in sev-

eral citizens' homes around this city. What is most intriguing is the fact that these homes are all gaffs that were blown by yourself between 40 and 50 years ago, Mr Huyghens."

"UGH! If he's having difficulty finding me, what makes you think I know where he is?"

"You are a human. He is a human. Humans are herd animals. You know of his whereabouts."

I shut my mouth over my bared teeth when I heard that. Herd animals. Unlike the rest of the crap she was talking, that was probably a direct translation from the original.

"Duke Kong, the Altairean Businessmandrill, craves an audience with Mr Svensson concerning large gambling debts accumulated by the latter party which, by accumulation of 50 years' compound interest, currently stands at over 10,000 Carnelian bobbins –"

"Hang on, you're not taking into account the Sophocéph revaluation! Besides, you can't push compound interest up over the actual amount of money circulating in this universe – OW!"

"There are some things in this universe of value far greater than can be represented by mere money. Mr Kong considers Mr Svensson's testicles, for example, to be priceless."

"AYARGH. What, d'you think I fell out of Avernus yesterday? Kong isn't that stupid. Svensson fell out of this Space-Time Continuum watched by millions – EEGA!"

"Faking falling out of the Space-Time Continuum is just the sort of thing Svensson would do to avoid payment. Now, can you provide me with any reason why I should not slowly remove the top layer of your skin here and now – ahhh!"

Rule one. Never show resistance to a Devil Doll. They see that as a challenge. They'll play with you all over the bar-room floor if they see a real fight in it. Slight coda to that first rule: never show resistance to a Devil Doll, unless you are holding a Maxelerator pistol. That was her "ahhh!"

And never point a Maxelerator at a Devil Doll unless you intend to use it.

Saturday Night Special, firing a home-made sliver of rather poor alloy, but it opened the back of her skull like a boiled egg hit with a big invisible spoon. Her pretty little brains went everywhere. Everyone carbon-based scuttled out the way to avoid being splattered with droplets from the poison glands.

I left the bar with apologies to the barkeep (a small green exoskeletal creature, called Dave since none of his clientele could pronounce his God-given name, since to do so would have involved rubbing their hind legs together, though pronouncing his God-given name had been tried in fits of drunken stupor). Nobody gave me any trouble. A Devil Doll baring teeth on anyone is dangerous enough to justify the use of field artillery, let alone a poxy little handgun.

I didn't find anything on the Doll's body but a licensed debt-collector's ID and a few bills of credit. As I left the bar, I looked both ways. Of course, I wouldn't have seen anything, even if there had been anyone there. To an Oni, stalking is both an instinct and a matter of racial pride. But Xede't's racial pride was

such that she'd evidently come out without backup. I made it home OK.

Now, we humans are placid herbivores (OK, omnivores). Running to ground, ambush and burrow security are *our* set of racial instincts. The human ghetto down People Street is a bad place for an Oni to go, unless you mean in the same sense as a Pizza to go. I was safe in the Cafe Elysee.

Elysee was my third, fourth, 17th and 23rd wife. She did the decor, for which I am obliged to apologize to my customers. I packed my toothbrush, a spare set of underwear, a good interactive erotic novel, and my Monday Morning special, a nasty little holdout xraser programmed to fire only when the sights moved onto a warm target. I primed the sights to fire on Oni body temperature, called a cab and was gone with the howling wind.

The Automats fell through Avernus about 65 years ago. Immediately, Mohandas Svensson became fascinated with them. They claimed to originate in a "trouser universe" (as opposed to a pocket one; my own coinage) many tiers above the universe of Earth, and to have fallen through into Earth's space-time, only to fall through again into Avernus.

They claimed to be able to tailor-make universes. Make black holes to measure. They claimed the spaces between the universes were filled with people of their kind. They were the trampolinists of the rubber-sheet universe, if mankind are its bedwetters.

They chose not to conquer Everywhen. I like to think they could have done. Rather than confront the powers-that-were, they chose to ignore them, like a bear calmly licking out a beehive. Their empires were eternities in their entirety, not a week's lease of one poxy little kicked-about planet in a minor cosmos.

You've got a universe, right? And it has holes in it, big black holes, like a badly-made bucket. And it's all draining away into a number of pocket universes. And these universes are in turn draining into their own pocket universes. Sort of cosmic sieve. Big universes have little universes, shrinking towards infinity. However, it isn't quite that simple. Collapsars aren't eternally stable objects, of course – there is a phenomenon known as quantum leakage, which causes them to shed very slight amounts of mass-energy over time. Also, if a collapsar drops below a certain mass limit, which is of the order of a few thousand tonnes, the quantum leakage effect goes haywire, and your collapsar goes BANG. This means – according to the Automats – that small-mass universes below a few thousand tonnes in mass are stable. They can never develop collapsars of their own, and it is possible to stop them growing any more massive. All you have to do is seal up the point of entry.

Sounds difficult. It isn't. The hole your thousand-tonne universe dropped through doesn't need to be much more massive than a few thousand tonnes itself. All you need to do is whizz a second, larger hole at it, and the two holes will rip themselves apart in a huge, star-nobbling concussion, and you'll have one big black hole left, which feeds only into its own, larger pocket universe to the exclusion of the smaller one, like a deeper course being dug to divert the course of a river.

Anyway, the white hole in the pocket universe van-

ishes, sealing off the universe. So what happens to the universe? Have you now got a stable thousand-tonne cosmos safe from gravitational collapse?

The Automats thought so. Mohandas believed them. The thousand-tonne universe was a modern physicist's equivalent of the Promised Land. A place where a race could live forever without dying, if they could only solve the problem of the eventual conversion of their universe to energy.

You can't fit a human being through a thousand-tonne singularity, and so Mohandas's thoughts and memories were transferred to hard-data storage like the minds of the Automats themselves. From then on, he had existed only as a pattern of data in an (incredibly sophisticated) circuit. And then, he'd been downloaded into a black hole, 50 years ago. So how could he have been seen in town only one week ago?

Of course, if he could be "transferred" or "downloaded," he could also be copied. Perhaps he sent only one copy through his mini-Avernus, and kept one here in Everywhen? There was, of course, an obvious machine-dependence problem. Hardware compatibility and all that. Popular fiction apart, a set of instructions designed for one incredibly complex circuit won't fit into another. So if Mohandas was here, he was in an Automat circuit somewhere. And he wanted – or needed – to see me.

All I had to do was find the circuit.

By five o'clock Wednesday evening, Real People time, I was there. Which is to say, nowhere. A Strange Blue Elephant Hamlet in the middle of highlands that looked enough like Pachie Prime to look very much like a junkyard. The rocks were full of iron oxide, like heaps of rusted metal. The sulphur frosting on them was more recent, being due to a dormant volcano nearby that the Carnelians had activated in order to make the air more like That Rotten Egg Smell Momma Used to Make Back Home, and the black oily lichen had been bioengineered back in the time of the Ovoids to soak up Pachie Prime atmosphere and replace it with methane and ethyl mercaptan. You can't grow anything out in the hinterlands. At least, nothing you set out to grow. Anyone who tries needs their head or heads examining. Nothing you will find anywhere will be anything like the environment you need to grow what you intend. Baby-blue skies above fields of golden corn you cannot have. Vast tracts of cerise marshland bubbling with subterranean helium, you can. Unless, of course, that's what you wanted in the first place.

So, like I was saying... The place looked like a junkyard, and smelled as though Satan himself had taken a shit in it.

But in the middle of the village was the thing that I was looking for. The only tangible evidence the Automats had left of their erstwhile presence, apart from memories in the minds of Men and Bems. They'd said it was a temple. Because of this, and because of the fact that nobody ever worshipped at it and it was in the back of beyond, it had been left alone since their departure.

If anyone had bothered to think twice, they'd have realized that intelligences inhabiting a VR net inside an optical crystal CPU wouldn't be too interested in a bricks-and-mortar structure in the Real World. True,

the Automats had had their mobile transports that walked and talked and looked like plastic-and-metal versions of real people, but the real Automats lived inside, in the incredibly complex crystalline minds that controlled the machinery. It figured that they'd leave some place behind for more of their kind to get beamed into if they, too, crashed through Avernus. A way station. A traveller's rest.

It wasn't quite bricks and mortar. More like some incredibly hard volcanic glass, formed into a perfect and very big bowl, like an amphitheatre with wheelchair access. As I stepped into it, I could feel how cold it was beneath my feet. Colder than the surrounding ground. Sulphur "snow" had settled at the bottom of it, but there should have been more than there was by now. After all, the neighbouring volcano had been activated for over ten Good Old Earth years now. Somehow, the structure was getting rid of it.

I walked into the bowl, and looked up at the tower in the centre. The bowl was the reflector, the tower the collector. That was obvious now. And once every planetary rotation, the reflector would be pointed directly at the horrid white whirlpool-in-reverse of Avernus, now high in the noonday sky.

"Hello, Moe," I said. "Can you hear me?"

"Hello, Jack," said a voice.

I turned around, and he was there.

Of course, I knew he wasn't *really* there. There was a luminous, see-through quality to him, and his vertical hold needed adjusting.

"It was all a scam, then," I said.

"I fell through 15 universes," he said.

"Wow," I said. "And no safety net either. What happened?"

"A group of Automat renegades got discontented after 100,000 years or so. Constantly squabbling, bickering, when the whole of reality was combined to a few squillion bytes of logical space. They started tunnelling themselves a way out of our universe."

This really did faze me. "But that's impossible. A thousand-tonne universe should be stable. You said so yourself."

"A thousand tonnes total, yes. But we only counted the conventional mass. We never counted on the extra thousands of tonnes that could be harnessed if only you could find a way to interact with weakly interactive particles. And they thought up a way. After all, they had an eternity to think in. Of course, even when they had their WIMP black hole completed, it was far too small for any substantial massive object to pass through it, and they were forced to rethink the way they would travel through the hole. They eventually had to settle for a high-powered X-ray laser that would beam out instructions into the next universe in the hope that someone would decode them and be able to accept a set of instructions to rebuild what for want of a better word I shall call their personalities.

"It was ten days or so before they got their first reply."

That sentence sailed past me unnoticed before I realized, Whoah There, something isn't right here. "Reply? Out of a black hole?"

"Ever wondered why the universe filters down, Jack? Why there's that mathematical limit on collapsar mass? And don't give me that 'because that's the way

it is' shit either. The universe is a phenomenally complex construct designed according to *crazy* laws. Why photic tunnelling? Why relativity? Why quantum leakage? There had to be a reason why things were the way they were, and we found out the reason why.

"Imagine all the big universes draining down into all the little ones. Put the big universes at the top of the cascade, and the little universes at the bottom, with Space-Time flowing like water. Now, right at the bottom of that cascade, the water can't flow any further. The universes are too small. No collapsar can form in them. The masses are insufficient. Why d'you think things are that way? Why d'you think no one can fall any further down? Why is there a barrier across the thousand-tonne universe limit?"

"Answer: because someone put one there. And they put it there to keep something in, Jack."

My skin was crawling. I wondered whether the Devil Doll really had bitten me after all. "What kind of something?"

"Something so bad it has to be hidden under the floor of the universe."

Despite all this, I laughed. "Oh come on, Moe. Who can decide what shape the universe is going to be?"

"I don't know. God, I guess."

"Then where's God now? If you've set free this loathsome thing, then why isn't God riding out to help you?"

"I don't know. I'm not the sort of guy who can punch upward through a collapsar and talk to him. Whatever we set free, though – that ate our little universe and barged up through 16 more, carrying half of us with it, before I finally managed to tear myself loose. There are universes where the galaxies are like white water in a mountain stream, Jack. I lost quite a bit of myself tearing loose. You know, I'm still not quite sure who you are."

"Erm, you were one of me. One of my people. Long ago." I pointed at the hologram. "You looked like that."

"Yes. I had a vague idea I did. I thought the representation might be pleasing to you."

"Well, it's certainly pleasing to me," rasped the unmistakeable voice of a translator speaker behind me.

I turned round. Not one, not two, but three Oni were standing behind me. And this time they were all armed – illegally so, with the sort of gun that can cut a small moon into individual planetlets.

Oh, dear. I was afraid this might happen.

I put up my hands.

There was a Chirrup standing with the Oni. He smiled. Chirrups, unlike many other eyeless species, possess facial expressions. Blind though they may be, they can lip-read by sonar, even in the dark. This particular Chirrup was well-dressed in a neutral-coloured, sound-deadening fabric; a literally quiet dresser. That suggested government rather than gangster.

"Mr Huyghens, I am very pleased to meet you. I am an officer in the Bureau of Colonial Security."

"Colonial Security? Security against what, may I ask? This is a closed universe."

"Mine is a new department. Our new governors, peace be upon them, have seen fit to guard against the constant threat of alien incursion from the adjoining dark star, which they are currently taking steps to find means of closing. For this reason, my department takes

an avid interest in this, ahem, man's alleged experiences. He is the only being in this microcosm known to have travelled through a dark star and returned. Knowing the character of your species and person by reputation, we inserted, into each of those bills of credit you recovered from the unarmed female Oni you shot, a sliver of a superconductive filament which we have been tracking using resonance from a radio beam. The female was not informed as to our actual intentions, and genuinely believed herself to be acting on behalf of a debt-collection agency. Having dealt with this one and apparently only pursuer, we considered (as it turns out, correctly) that you would not bother to check whether there were any more."

Moe Svensson, who had not put up his hands, being a hologram, regarded the Chirrup with some distaste. "You want to live in a closed cosmos," he said.

The Chirrup shook his head pleasantly, still smiling with all his teeth. Was that a friendly expression or a murderous one? "My own personal preferences do not enter into the matter. I must be motivated purely by my duty to our rulers. They wish Avernus closed, and I am bound by my position to obey."

"Imagine living in a universe where the walls are paper-thin," Svensson continued. "Imagine living synapse-to-synapse with a thousand million other minds, all of whom you know intimately, and hate intimately, and loathe, and despise. That's what your closed cosmos will come down to eventually. 'Stagnant' is far too nice a word."

"Your miniature universe, Mr Svensson, was considerably smaller than the Carnelian Empire's latest outpost will be."

Up till then, I'd never seen a hologram get angry, but Svensson managed a good enough imitation to make the Chirrup step backward involuntarily. "I've seen and been in your 'Carnelian Empire,' mister. Don't forget I only fell through Avernus yesterday. You know why they came through in the first place? One of their warships, damaged in battle, couldn't muster enough thrust to push up out of the gravity well. They're fighting a losing battle against another race they call the Host. Want to know why they're at war? Their ships fired on the first Hostile colony they sighted, using nuclear and catalytically toxic weapons. They've been at war for the last 500 years, and been pushed back slowly all that time. Oh, they want to close Avernus all right. They're terrified of what the Host will do to them when they come through."

The Chirrup laughed. It had obviously practised the manoeuvre in human-Chirrup relations classes. "Very amusing, Mr Svensson. But do bear in mind, please, that I have no way of knowing whether you are truly an entity who has fallen through an improbable variety of universes, or just a small-time cardsharp who has hit on a novel and interesting means of proving to the world that he is not dead. Consequently, I still fully intend to search this structure of yours until I find your central processing facilities, be they on optical crystal or a large lump of convoluted grey matter that will have to be forcibly removed from a bloody hole carved in the top of your cranium. I have no doubt that this place is adequately defended. Please be assured, however, that the weapons my colleagues are carrying are

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REALITY

Meg Turville Heitz

A bus belched away from the curb, having disgorged a dozen college students onto the snowy sidewalk and absorbed their equal in academic staff. Cal sucked in a deep breath of diesel hanging in the air, savouring the taste of it in his throat. Then he hawked onto the pavement at the feet of a gaggle of sorority sisters crossing from the campus Common. He laughed at their disgust, one of his deeper, throatier laughs, the kind that made women speed their pace and throw nervous glances back at him, measure him, his tweed jacket, his brushed suede coat clean and the collar turned up, a beret pulled low. They didn't know what he'd do. He shattered their stereotype. What a way to earn a living.

He wanted his delight to echo from the bus shelter, carry down the sidewalk and scurry up their backs. The laughter caught in his throat. Through the spit and puke-stained Plexiglas of the bus shelter, a bearded man's icy gaze was fixed on Cal. In the three weeks of his study, he'd found that men seldom paid Crazy Cal much overt notice, merely herded their women a little faster, crinkling foreheads at someone so normal-looking who acted so bizarre. Most stood outside the shelter Cal dominated – in the cold and snow – pretending they hadn't seen him, or clearly imagined him just another eccentric professor. The best to observe were the cocksure college toughs whose step grew more jaunty, as if they could lord over a man they certainly must think a bus-shelter derelict.

That bearded man still watched him through the Plexiglas, stared, as if he didn't see the co-eds and shoppers streaming by the bus stop, nor the crowds of riders waiting just beyond Cal's domain. A pimply underclassman moved his woman to the side away from Cal's view, almost blocking the Starer.

Cal could have women like theirs, women who feared him. Women once flocked to him, adored him. He'd have them again. It was all a grand experiment, after all, exploring human nature.

It threw them such a curve, seeing a fiftyish prof hanging out in a bus shelter. And watching the women squirm. That was a bonus he hadn't considered when first he undertook this project. Funded, yet. Department fools actually thought he was collecting data. Sure, he'd started a spreadsheet, recorded some of the best responses and most gratifying encounters. But tenure has its privileges. Hell, this was just plain fun.

The distant shriek of brakes and roar of engine in low gear heralded the approach of the 3.38 Kennedy Express down University Avenue. He should be crow-

ing, howling his appreciation as the driver hit a slushy puddle in the gutter and cast brown gobs over the scuttling co-eds. But the Starer still watched him, *judged* him, with open contempt, while all others pretended not to see him.

"Picture costs a buck!" Cal snarled, grabbing his groin. Usually they turned away in disgust now, shook their heads at other decent folk at the stop. The bearded man's lip curled and he just continued to stare. That was even worth a notation.

"What, you want to touch it?" Cal flung at the Starer, teasing him with one quick up and down of his zipper. "I'm not that kind of guy."

Cackling at his own cleverness, Cal slapped a tweed knee and paced his shelter, ready to shout, to rave a little and see if that would make the Starer turn away.

The Kennedy squealed to a halt in front of Cal's shelter. The crowd waiting outside the reach of Cal's kingdom scurried to the door, backs rigid, pushing their way onto the bus. Once within the safety of the Kennedy Express, they gazed out at him. As if a bus window could protect them. As if they could escape his power to make them *think*. That was the whole exercise. Or at least he liked to say that, when grad students asked what his project was *really* about.

What passed through women's thoughts when they squirmed beneath his scrutiny? Fear? Perhaps just a little excitement?

Cal scanned those awaiting the next bus. The Starer had disappeared. The Kennedy roared away, leaving behind only a cloud of smoke and a nine-by-eleven Manilla envelope lying on the sidewalk.

From his bench, Cal studied the envelope. It had come to rest on one of the few dry spots on the pavement where snow hadn't gone slushy from salt and traffic. It fluttered a little and threatened to run with each passing vehicle. What did it contain? Which of his frightened flock dropped it in the rush to escape Crazy Cal? About to retrieve it, he hesitated.

What if the Starer dropped it for him? Was there something calculated in how the Starer had watched him like that, seeming to see right through the press of people, above those clearly taller –

Crazy thoughts. He chuckled at himself. More likely, the mustached woman whose lip always quivered her indignation when he looked at her had dropped it. He'd been studying her reactions with interest, noting how she managed to keep a precise distance from him. Her thighs fighting to escape too-tight jeans would dimple

as if she poised for flight. Breasts jutting out like a Jane Russell commercial bounded up now and then as she emitted little nervous sighs. But she always kept an eye on him when she thought he wasn't looking.

Maybe it was the credit union teller who always took a step back when he came to her window, touching her fingertips to her lips as if to somehow hold back her little gasp of fear? Susie, her nameplate told him. Ever since the first time he'd greeted her at the stop, she had performed her little ritual for him, touching her fingertips to her lips, her freckle-spattered nose flaring, her eyes widening, her gaze slipping away to study someone's Reeboks. He had copious notes on Susie.

Did Susie secretly worry about him? Did she wonder if Cal had fallen on hard times and thus left her little charitable contribution to his study, there on the sidewalk, in an envelope large enough to draw his attention? Or did the envelope instead hold a note from Susie, pledging herself to him, never to leave?

A pair of geeks in band jackets strolled by, giggling at each other nervously as they threw sidelong glances at him. Maybe they wanted his groin-tugging treatment. One kicked the envelope, sending it skidding a little closer to Cal's shelter. He licked his lips at them, savouring the sticky sensation of Carmex, then laughed heartily when they sped their pace with a little yelp. This was the best job he'd ever had.

Someone else had planted a footprint on the envelope. Was it important business? Someone's resumé that he could laugh at for long hours? Jesus, he was getting *thousands* to sit here and torment passersby. Maybe he'd read it aloud, right here, to entertain his legions of nervous admirers.

Had the Starer left it behind?

A mixed group strolled by, none taking note of him. This had happened several times this week, already! They were ruining his study, skewing his data points! Had one of his grad students dared hint about his project – was the word out that Crazy Cal in the bus shelter was doing a psych study? He kicked the Plexiglas. The entire shelter quivered. How dare they spoil his research!

When he glanced back at the sidewalk, the envelope wore another footprint, and had almost come home to him, just outside the reach of the shelter.

Cal crouched to study the envelope. It now rested upon a little tuft of snow, a single sheet of paper in it, at most. Was it empty garbage? Maybe he'd find in it an academic transcript. That might be something to play with. He had contemplated a study of reactions to harassing phone calls. A transcript would give him an awful lot of information about some unknowing slob who'd just *freak* to get a call from Crazy Cal.

Another bus roared up; Cal didn't even pay attention to which one as its blast of air sent the envelope skittering to his feet. Right to him, as if it was meant to be. He snatched up the envelope and studied it. "For Elayne, what you asked for," someone had scrawled on the outside.

Elayne. A seductive name. He liked the way she spelled it. He dated an Elaine once; a delicate thing with shoulder-length blonde hair that framed her face. Her full lips begged him to kiss her, her body shapely, flawless, but for the little mole by her eye that disap-

peared when she smiled. She was the perfect woman who did everything he told her, without question, sweet to a fault. One day she just disappeared, without calling to say goodbye.

He couldn't help but imagine this Elayne, blond, vulnerable, needing him to protect her from the vagrants of the world. The kind of woman who drew men to give her her every desire.

Cal ripped open the envelope. He barely registered the arrival of the Washington Express or the babble of unmolested passersby. Inside the envelope he found one of those magic 3-D pictures. Stereograms, someone had dubbed them – he thought he remembered the name from the comics page of the Sunday paper. It might be diverting, even if a bit disappointing. A transcript would have made his week.

Crossing his eyes at the stereogram, he tried to find the floating 3-D image inside. At first, he found only a mess of undulating colour, red and blue, green and yellow, black and white; it wavered a little here and there as if it wanted to form a picture but played shy, like a woman. He focused more closely on a distortion emerging from the computer noise that generated the picture. Was that an image of a reclining nude? The second he saw it she was gone.

Cal cast a quick glance around his stop. Only a few people had gathered for the next bus. The stereogram drew him. Focusing again, more intently, he imagined how he'd glimpsed her: sprawled on the couch, her full lips pouty, her gaze turned his way. Seductive. Wanting. The image emerged again, her gaze more sensual than he remembered. *This* was a gift for Elayne? Or was the woman in the picture an image of Elayne herself? Why didn't women shaped like *that* come to his bus stop?

The 4.38 Kennedy Express arrived. Cal barely noted it, but momentarily lost his concentration on the woman, merely a form, but a flawless form, in the picture. He glanced down the block and blinked in surprise. How had he lost the time? An hour more and dark would bring targets too dangerous to hassle.

The stereogram intrigued; it demanded he crack its mystery. He needed to understand what he saw in this woman's eyes, in Elayne's eyes. It had to be Elayne gazing out at him with longing, built of colour like a blue and red diagram of veins, arteries, capillaries, tiny lines forming contours. Her hair cascaded, red and blue, across a bare shoulder. Her breast stabbed out at him as if daring him to touch her, begging him to fill her needs. Or, perhaps, rescue her from the image in which she'd become imprisoned.

He had to squint as evening settled around the shelter. If he could just get his eyes to adjust right, he'd see more.

First, he noted the only flaw in her form, a slight blotch, perhaps, by her eye. Then, a kitchen table emerged from behind the couch, supporting a litre bottle of soda and a bag of chips. A lit candle flickered there, yellow. The candle held its own colour.

"Cal, you're here late tonight. The student crowd's all gone home. Don't tell me you're going to harass the drunks, now."

The voice beside him jerked Cal from the stereogram to find the black uniform of university police. He peered at the man. The voice sounded familiar, but the

face remained undefined, too dim in this light.

"Lost track of the time," Cal muttered, stretching and finding he had to stomp his feet to bring back the feeling. "You really need better lights in these shelters. A person could get mugged." The clock on the Common read 10.30. He shook his head a little to lift a fog that had settled over him. His eyes felt scratchy and tired as he squinted down the street, now empty of all but an occasional car.

"By the way, we got a complaint yesterday. Just a warning," the cop – what was his name? – confided.

Without reply, Cal tucked the stereogram inside his coat pocket and strode away into the night, whistling.

At home, Cal didn't even bother with his nightly rituals. The meticulous schedule he kept was already shot and he hated going into a lecture unprepared. He had a graduate seminar at 8.50 in the morning, his only notes scribbled on the back of an old blue book, and immediately following he'd scheduled office hours. Most nights found him in bed by now since he preferred to do his daily run early, when all the windows on campus remained dark and the streets empty. The cat meowed at him. He ignored her. His teapot remained cold. Settling on the couch, still in coat and cap, he switched on the reading lamp and pulled out the stereogram.

She'd moved within the picture.

Cal felt a slight shiver down his back. How could the image change? Was this some new kind of technology? Maybe, like an Etch-a-Sketch, moving the picture altered the image? Or was it more like one of those holographs that could be made to smile or frown, or open and close its eyes by tilting the picture?

If so, technology had come a long way. The couch she had reclined upon was empty now but for an afghan thrown aside, a pillow askew against a coffee table, her blouse and bra wadded up between the cushions. If he squinted just so, he discerned a refrigerator in the left corner of the stereogram, its door open. Then he saw her, crouched before the refrigerator and peering into the light. And true light seemed to flow from the refrigerator now, gleaming on bare breasts.

She looked up at him! Moved, just as he stared at her! A startled hand reached for her lips but stopped short, her eyes widening. A nose that seemed to carry a pattern of freckles, flared. Then she smiled. Her hair seemed longer than before, maybe a little darker, although he found it hard to tell, the way the white light of the refrigerator fell on it. The flaw he'd noticed beside her eye was gone.

He scowled to realize she smiled not at him, but *past* him, as if someone else stood at his back, peeking over his shoulder. Did Elayne await her lover? Abruptly, a man's bulk seemed to pass right through Cal. The dark, computer-generated shape, bearded, filled the stereogram, then receded as it approached Elayne, blocking Elayne from Cal's view.

For an instant, Cal lost his focus. All the colours that had defined themselves slithered back into a mush of computer dots.

The picture fell from his hands. With a start, he realized he stood beside his stove. Had his unconscious instincts suggested this might be a good time for some

tea? Then the light in his kitchen window revealed dawn stretching the edges of the horizon.

Cal again felt that strange shiver up his spine. A whole night! A whole *night* he'd given to this strange picture where images moved, independently, never repeating their actions. Well, if this was a gift for Elayne, he'd saved the poor woman from tragedy. Imagine how someone as delicate as Elayne – so sweet and unassuming and not a shred of self-control – would become lost within a game image! Doubtlessly, she wouldn't even know her plight until it was too late to rescue her: trapped.

Perhaps she already was trapped inside. "What you asked for," the envelope had said. Had the Starer taken vengeance on a lover and forced her inside this image? The man that had passed through him had an almost familiar –

"That's crazy," Cal mumbled to himself. He laughed aloud. The subtlety, the deliciously sinister undertone of his own chuckle gave him comfort.

As worn as he felt – as if he'd spent the night working, not idle on his couch – he still had work to do and only an hour in which to grab breakfast and make his seminar. After office hours, if he could make it through the day without a nap, he'd hang out at his bus shelter, untaming the lives of his subjects. They all lived in their own insular worlds; peeking out through panes of glass at the frightening world around them, they thought they could ignore Otherness by simply walking faster. His job was to make them squirm, to make them wonder. And of course collect *thousands* for messing with their heads, collecting bogus data. Maybe he'd submit a paper on how one could get a grant to sit around and be rude.

So much like the students of the world, the woman looked out at Cal, incredulous, startled, as if a stranger had just appeared in the doorway to her bedroom. She held her hands out in front of her, keeping a precise distance as the stereogram took Cal into the room. She backed toward her bed, appearing, at first mortified. In her nightdress, she looked dowdy. Had Elayne somehow changed her shape? The computer dots seemed to paint the slightest of mustaches above a quivering lip.

Then, as she reached her bed and crawled onto it, she looked past him and smiled. Did she peer over his shoulder as he bent toward her? Her expression invited, and Cal dropped on the bed beside her. Again, the bearded figure – the Starer? – moved through him, blocking his view. She leapt up and passed right by Cal, seemingly right out of the image.

For an instant, before he could even react to the presence of the bearded man, the way Elayne left the room, he recognized the sensation of a bed beneath him. He felt the quilted comforter soft to his touch, the springs bouncing off an old-fashioned frame, the way his weight on the bed had forced her toward him, how he had heard the creak of the baseboard.

As suddenly as he realized he had truly felt these sensations, the oddity tugged him from the image. He blinked. Somehow the stereogram had drawn him in without his intent. He'd merely meant to fold the drawing and tuck it in his breast pocket as he left for work. He'd dared just a peek. Now he realized he'd come

halfway across campus and the clock on the Common read 9.30. He'd missed his seminar.

None of this made any sense. Running through a litany of potential mental disorders that could cause such a phenomenon, he rejected them all. It wasn't him, but something in the stereogram, something he had to understand, to explore. Really, he should apply for funding to study the oddity of stereograms that could so enthrall someone of even his acumen. So engrossing, the way the dendritic pattern of red and blue began to mesh into flesh tones, skin, a sense of an alternate reality. People moved within the stereogram, seemingly lived independent of his observation. Even the air moved around him when she passed, right out of the image.

Cal hurried for his seventh-floor office in North Hall, coming in through the parking garage to beat the rush of students taking public elevators from the first floor. The dim garage seemed darker than usual, indistinct. Maybe he'd caught a bug, the onset of a cold giving him this foggy sense of not being quite here.

Reaching for his staff elevator key, he found, instead, the stereogram. At some point he must have stuffed it deep into his coat pocket. Even at arm's length in the dim garage, he could see an image, movement, a sense of something happening as if he held a small television screen in his hand.

Suddenly, he was again in a bedroom doorway, almost as if he had never left. The woman, Elayne, still had that slight mustache, which now appeared to contain a sheen of sweat. She stared at the bearded man who kept his back to Cal and seemed to mirror each of Cal's movements as if to keep him away from the woman, Elayne. But Cal knew, now. He recognized the Starer's build. Jaw clenching, Cal also recognized an emotion: hate. He hated how Elayne ignored him, seeking the Starer instead. How could she have looked on Cal with such loathing, twice now, yet found a smile for the Starer?

The Starer appeared stiff, mechanical, as he pulled the woman to him. Cal took a deep breath. The woman – was it Elayne? – emitted a small gasp, loud in Cal's ears. Cal *heard* it, as he'd heard the creak of bedsprings. The Starer ripped away her dowdy nightdress to reveal skin, not the red-blue of computer dots. Flesh tones. She emitted a sob. Yet she still smiled at the Starer, though her eyes – they were brown now, not multi-coloured – expressed something other than pleasure. Fear?

So delicate she appeared, needing him; Cal reached out to her. Had he somehow given life to this stereogram? The flicker of the thought disturbed him. Could the Starer be in this stereogram, making Elayne cry, if Cal hadn't first looked into it? Did his own mind now direct Elayne to slip from the Starer's grasp and run for the kitchen, her heavy breasts swinging, her thick thighs jiggling? If Cal looked away, he sensed Elayne and the Starer would continue the chase. He didn't cause this, the Starer did.

The Starer paced into the kitchen after retreating Elayne, caught her, pushed her against the counter, lifted her... Was that a grimace of terror or the enraptured gasp of ecstasy –?

A rap on his office door made Cal start from the stereogram. Reddening, he pulled himself closer to the desk

to hide an erection of which he only now grew aware. He didn't recall coming up the elevator, or taking off his coat, or settling with the crumpled stereogram smoothed out on his desk. His wall clock said three p.m.; he should be at the bus shelter by now.

"Yes?" he demanded.

The door swung open to reveal a morose, mouse-like co-ed framed in his doorway. She tucked a straight strand of dark hair behind her ear; her cheeks flushed with the chill of outside, or maybe she'd taken the stairs all the way up. The scent of fresh air, mingled with a muskier odour reached across the desk at him. He almost imagined the salty taste of sweat on her skin.

"I can't fail this class," she said as if no other student had ever blown an exam or paper or whatever she'd come to whine about.

Did he recognize her? She appeared only vaguely familiar, so indistinct as she detailed problems that sounded so much like a babble of white noise in the background. In his office, she took on no more distinction than the filing cabinet or a shelf of books, except for the way one slender hand ensured that a wayward strand of hair stayed behind her ear.

Cal couldn't stand listening to her. He peeked at the stereogram, where he sensed movement, life moving on without him. The Starer was raping – or making love to – Elayne this very moment, he knew it. Was he supposed to stop it? She'd smiled, but her eyes told him something else. Could he stop it? It wasn't real. Or was it? Had he somehow crossed into another dimension? Absurd. What else could explain this strange experience?

A whiff of sex radiated from the picture, a scent like a bed well-warmed, of flesh and sweat.

If he cocked his head just so, he caught sounds emanating from the stereogram: a man's grunts, flesh slapping flesh, a woman's cries. Pleasure? Pain? Elayne needed him. Arousal stirred again.

He turned back to the student, but found his door shut and no sign of the girl.

Elayne had tucked her hair behind her ears as she stroked the spines of books in a bookshelf, her bare buttocks to him, glistening with sweat.

"I'm here for you," he said, his own voice startling him. "What you asked for." Reaching out to grasp soft flesh, he turned her and pushed her against the bookcase. Hot skin met his. Her breathy whimper touched his ear. She was his, in his arms this time, not the Starer's. Looking on his triumph, he found her smiling, her lips parted as her breaths came in quick gasps. She wasn't looking at him, but at someone else who seemed to pass right through Cal to reach Elayne.

Cal looked around in the dark, confused for a moment. Night had fallen outside. He discovered his groin damp and sticky. With comforting certainty, Cal realized he'd found another universe. From within it Elayne and the Starer called to him, peeking from a window as they begged him to return, yet repelled him.

His wall-clock said ten p.m. How many hours had passed within the stereogram? He grabbed his coat, determined to leave the stereogram where it sat on his desk until he could establish a study methodology for it. He couldn't afford to have his life dictated by a world that ran on a time-scale so much slower than his. Sur-

rounded by nothing but the empty grey desktop, the stereogram's colours undulated, shifted, begged him to look within, to find meaning in each colour fragment, each dot cast on a screen by some unthinking computer. Somehow the computer had trapped Elayne, an Elayne who changed shape and nature with his every trip into her world. Was it the punitive act of a jilted lover "giving her what she wanted" by imprisoning her, or did she relish a world in which she lived for her lovers' pleasure?

He managed to turn his back on the stereogram and leave his office. The scent followed him, that musky warmth of after-sex. He imagined the blue and red dendritic pattern undulating with each move Elayne made, shifting in and out of his perception, some amorphous thing he had to hold, to protect, to own.

The elevator doors opened onto the parking garage. Cal couldn't move. After a long minute, he pushed the button to take him back up to seventh. He didn't even think about it. As he strode down the hall toward his office, he smiled at the woman operating a floor buffer. She gave him a toothy grin. Her dark gaze and coppery skin blended to a red and blue that shifted in and out of his perception.

A dizziness, maybe the lack of food and sleep gave him a strange sense of otherness. It seemed as if someone else were placing a hand on the door knob to his office, even while Cal felt the knob, cold and solid in his palm.

The door opened onto Elayne's living room, the now-grey couch scattered with clothing, the pillows askew, a desk lamp barely lighting the dark recesses of the room, which appeared to have been rearranged. Was that a bookshelf she stood beside, where once her kitchen had been? Hair tousled, her coppery skin glowed, glossy.

The room smelled of sex. She'd been with the Starer.

The thought made a hard knot in his throat. There she stood, smiling at him, toothy, broad, her dark eyes warm as if she saw no one but him. Cal knew better. She looked beyond him, as if out a window, at something more real.

"Elayne!" he shouted. In his shelter, he might have kicked the Plexiglas, thrown his coffee at a passerby, hawked up on the sidewalk, thrown the trash can. The Starer stepped through him, turned to face him and openly grinned his mocking grin as he blocked Cal, yet again, from claiming Elayne.

"This is my world," the Starer told him.

"No! You can't take her from me!" Cal shouted, grasping for the woman. She gazed at him with such adoration, a delicate thing so seductive and sweet. He lunged at the Starer, passing through *him* as Elayne shrieked in fear.

A sharp pain ripped Cal from reality.

He squinted into a halo of bright light: someone pointed a flashlight in his face. His eyes uncrossed, the image around him losing its focus. By the shape of shadows around him he recognized his office. Life played on in the stereogram, suspended on the red/blue undulating shape of a desk. A lamp came on in Elayne's living room, a comforting yellow glow. Cal's office dissolved into a pool of colour contours, red/blue, yellow/green.

Voices surrounded him now. Distorted human shapes moved around him, their words distant and indistinct. What might be a lamp came on. It threw only a sense of brightness in the multi-coloured image. A pain in his

head beat in tune with his heart and he realized he had been struck. Someone gripped his arms, holding him up.

"I don't think he'll convince anyone this behaviour is part of a study," a voice said somewhere, tight with an unexpressed tension. "Graduated to drawing blood."

Cal's hands seemed to end in a dendritic pattern of blue-red, dripping dots of colour, pixelated life coating the floor of his office.

"Professor... you're under arrest," a voice said close to his ear, familiar, though he couldn't place it. It didn't matter. He could see the stereogram on his desk, limned by flashlight. The flesh tones of a reclining nude jutted out at him, her skin slightly damp with exertion. She stroked the suede sleeve of his jacket thrown over the arm of the couch, and adjusted his beret balanced on the back. Her seductive eyes smiled out at him, the slightest hint of blemish beside one eye.

Looking up at the flitting, nebulous image of blue and red grasping him by the arm, Cal had to cross his eyes to discern the form of a man. Cal reached for his stereogram, but another ill-defined shape grabbed that arm and twisted it behind him.

No matter. He'd conjure another. Elayne awaited him, as she'd always awaited him, getting just what she'd asked for. There was a study in this. He might even get funding.

Meg Turville Heitz lives in Wisconsin, USA, and a story by her appeared in *Blood Muse* (1995), an anthology edited by Esther Friesner and Martin H. Greenberg. The above is her first contribution to *Interzone*.



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Most big films these days, especially big sf films, are part of a multi-fronted invasion force for which the movie itself is in commercial terms merely the shop window. Even so, the story of the *Mars Attacks!* franchise is a truly jaw-loosening triumph of value-added merchandising, of which even Tim Burton's strange movie is merely a serendipitous spinoff: the Topps corporation's masterly cross-market relaunch of their disastrously-received 1962 bubblegum cards, involving a reissue of the original set with celebrity addenda, a mystifyingly well-received comics range, and a series of spinoff novels, all supplemented now with a whole second wave of movie tie-in cards, models, and text and graphic novels to coincide with the film release. Why anyone would actually want to touch any of this tat is way beyond me, since none of it betrays the slightest inkling of why the original cards were so extraordinary, or why even on relaunch they should scream FILM ME to Hollywood's most warily-tolerated inside-outsider.

The historic significance of the original cards is that they were quite simply the only sf product of their day to market to children uncensored images of surrealistically graphic violence. Topps had already shrewdly spotted that, while film, television, and comics were subject to a variety of puritanical codes, there were no such sanitizing mechanisms in place for gum cards; and so they conceived the daring notion of saturating the nation's candystores with explicit images of massacre, confessedly inspired by the golden age of EC Comics before the iron curtain descended with Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* crusade and the introduction of the Comics Code. And for a single extraordinary season these images, smuggled to schoolboys in waxpaper packets with a token stick of pink gum, not only colonized the nightmares of a generation, but marked a breakthrough in the marketing of narrative with added value – selling their story in lottery packets of numbered single frames.

Most of this, of course, was another side of the world. The *Mars Attacks!* cards themselves never made it to the UK, or indeed much further than New Jersey before the enraged reaction of parents and educators forced their withdrawal from the market (and, in the process, pushed their collectability value through the stratosphere). What did, eventually, were the 1961 *Civil War* cards by the same artists, whose triumph the *Mars Attacks!* set from the following year had aimed to replicate. For British males of a certain age, those cards still remain not only the source of that uncannily-specific knowledge of American history 1860-5 that they

use to impress spouse and offspring into dreamless slumber, but a vivid evocation of the Vietnam era (the cards were marketed in the UK in about 1966, by which time the subject had resonances unimaginable at the time of their creation), and a first formative encounter with an undisguised aesthetic of extreme and gratuitous sadism – the lurid *recto*, showing fanciful tableaux of exotic impalings legitimized by pseudo-historical datelines (“GORED TO RIBBONS: Marlboro, GA, July 12, 1862”), seeming mysteriously detached from the comparatively sober, and little-read, bulletins from “*Civil War News*” on the *verso* (“Lee’s Forces Withdraw to Protect Supply Lines”).

Even so, it seems amazing now that anyone could have imagined they’d get away with the *Mars Attacks!* set. The *Civil War* cards, of which I still have somewhere in the roof the remnants of a once-complete set of 75, had snuck their sensational images of bloodbath past the nation’s guardians on the back, literally, of a meretriciously-educational subject matter whose historical and patriotic credentials were above question. To follow up with a narrative derived instead from the most despised, opprobrious pulp fantasy was a gesture either of unwarranted bravado or scarcely-credible innocence, especially as the imagery of the *Mars Attacks!* cards was if anything even stronger than its predecessors’. (The most widely-reproduced, *BURNED TO DEATH*, shows a Martian’s heat-ray scorching the flesh off the skeleton of a human victim below the neck, with the untouched and still-conscious head gaping down in shock at the evaporation of its body – an image recreated with fidelity and glee throughout Burton’s film, but neutered by the ironic wink at its own absurdity that reduces the moment of terminal shock to a gruesome comic doubletake.) It’s not surprising that



MUTANT POPCORN



NICK LOWE

the cards’ cold-war narrative curve became their own epitaph: a brief, aggressive invasion by grotesque intruders repelled as America regroups and extirpates the horrid creatures from the face of creation.

In this light, one of the most fascinating achievements of Burton’s film has been to focus attention on the strangely cinematic poetics of a shunned sf genre – perhaps America’s last great underground storytelling medium. For gum cards have a complex narrativity that comes closer to the structure of film script than any other medium, assembled as they are out of serially-numbered scenes of text and image that come to you in a haphazard order and have to be pieced laboriously together into a coherent sequence. Sometimes there may not be time to complete the set, and the storyline will have SCENE MISSING gaps. Certainly to assemble a continuous narrative from the *Civil War* mythemes was an obsessive, eventually fetishistic, labour spread over months: the need to discover what happened to Stonewall Jackson somewhere around the elusive card 54 became an epic historiographic quest for the missing document, the only map a preprinted checklist of numbers and card titles. You can see exactly why this kind of thing would appeal to the screenwriter’s eye of someone like 1984’s Jonathan Gems, Burton’s scenarist and the man who originated the project when he snapped up a pack on the relaunch. (David Lynch, for one, still reputedly writes by collecting scenes on three-by-fives until he has the canonical 60, whereupon he puts a production together and shoots them.)

It still has to be conceded that, judged purely for itself, *Mars Attacks!* is Burton's least disarming film, and for much of its outstayed time is positively tiresome. It's always been a problem for Burton that, as a visionary *auteur* who can't actually write, he's so at the mercy of his scenarists (only Gems credited here, but there's allegedly been some clean & polish from the Ed Wood team). Even more than his usual, *Mars Attacks!* is strong on image, weak on narrative; pacing is fatally slack, humour more-miss-than-hit, and the deliberately-canonical Well(e)sian storyline doomed to be short on surprises. As always, the actors aren't directed as tightly as they should be – particularly Jack Nicholson, who is largely left to do as much as he likes of all the stuff he does worst – though at least here there's so much celebrity honeyroast on display that a few extra percent added water hardly shows up on the scale.

The strongest elements, as you'd expect, are visual – the Martian character design, the head-transplant silliness, throwaways like the germ-warfare arcade game, and eyepopping cinematizations of bizarre images from the original Topps bubblegum cards like the flaming cattle of the opening sequence. In the plus column, Danny Elfman's score is, like all his work for Burton, quite outrageously good – here a glorious postmodern synthesis of golden-age alien-movie anachronisms, with a hint of theremin throbbing away low in the mix. But this relentless postmodernism is also part of the problem. Inevitably, but still disappointingly, Burton's movie rejects the cards' most compelling feature, their solemn lack of anything resembling irony. Instead, we

have a dispiritingly wink-y alien movie that images the unimaginable in terms of a preposterous mix of anachronisms (oscillographs being so much more cinematic than PowerBooks) and anthropomorphisms (Martians chortle, lust after our women, and give one another five).

Some of this, I suppose, qualifies as satire. *Mars Attacks!* is to an even



greater extent than planned a parody of a big Hollywood movie, with such an absurd number of stars that the opening credits take on a kind of surreal bingo quality in which names are being drawn endlessly and at random out of a spinning barrel, and with a gleeful disaster-movie potlatch of A-list performers. Burton and team can hardly be blamed, and should perhaps be congratulated, for the fact that it's come out as an unintended parody of one specific movie, actually later and faster in the making, and that its cheaper laughs, sloppier pace, and bigger-scale budgetary follies make *Independence Day* emerge from the encounter with its Teflon suit largely unmarked. Still, the many inadvertent parallels do make for instructive comparisons. Most obviously, both feel the need to personalize America's tragedy by protagonizing the first family in a way now familiar but inconceivable before the Clinton administration, and then opportunistically wasting its most expendable members. But whereas in *Independence Day*'s testosterone-pumped world that meant killing off mom and McGuffinizing the daughter, in Burton's world the alienated teenage daughter is the emotional and ideological centre, and both ghastly parents are marked to die that she may be free.

It's a significant contrast, because this, under Burton's invasion plan, is in nuclear microcosm the fate of America. The big difference between *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!* is that in *ID* the war of the worlds had only two sides, US vs THEM, with our side unproblematically equated to America's established order. But in *Mars Attacks!* Washington is no more lovable than its destroyers, and the real function of their mutual genocide is to cleanse the world for a motley underclass of Tim Burton characters to inherit – the flakes, the dropouts, the introverted teens, along with Tom Jones, Jim Brown, and Slim Whitman. Despite its superficial anarchist affectations and nostalgia for a form of disaster-movie plotting where it initially seems any character, no matter how sympathetic or famously-cast, can get written out at any time, *Mars Attacks!* quickly unfolds into a surprisingly moralistic and judgmental narrative, in a sense verging on the biblical. If it looks at times as though most of humanity is up for vaporizing, that's largely because Burton hates an awful lot of people: politicians, soldiers, rednecks, media folk, lawyers, authority figures of any kind, as well as anyone who wouldn't go back to rescue their amusingly-Alzheimered granny.

And though there's an extent to which characters are simply trashed once they've run out of potential, the purifying flame of the Martian rap-ture does an impressively complete job of blasting the earth selectively clean of souls for whom there's no place in Tim Burton Heaven. Though it only just manages to find room, in the Lukas Haas and Chelsea Clinton characters, for the obligatory directorial self-portrait as alienated dreamer in search of a partner soul, it's no less autobiographical than *Pee-wee*, *Batman* and *Catwoman*, *Nightmare Before Christmas*, the Winona Ryder character in *Beetlejuice*, and most especially the two *Eds*. If anything, Burton's recent films have been getting more personal and self-reflexive of his own position in a Hollywood that only feigns to understand him; and in *Mars Attacks!* he trumps his personal trash-culture best, drawing material this time not from cartoons, kids' TV, comics or bad sf movies, but from the most notorious and suppressed specimen of an artform so despised that nobody else would consider it even filmable, and turning it into a vast, money-burning global epic of a world-order smithereened by an invasion of anarchic bug-eyed cartoons. As a film, it's not the greatest of shakes; but as a personal essay in turning commerce back into the raw material of art, it's an epic achievement.

Nick Lowe

Below: Natalie Portman is the President's daughter in *Mars Attack!*



Dark Skies (Channel 4, Mondays) is irritating in the way that a badly-tuned radio is irritating: it's noisy and indistinct but tuning a fraction this way would give you humour, and a fraction the other *The X-Files*. The programme formula starts with an historical event (historical in this context meaning something from the 1960s), mixes in a hero and heroine, stirs up a nasty bunch of conspirators and garnishes with lobster-headed aliens. Boil vigorously till done.

Well, all right, not lobsters. The alien ganglions that sit in people's heads controlling what they do are too small to be lobsters and too big to be prawns. More of a langoustine, perhaps? But then if someone came up to you and said that there were aliens putting langoustines into people's brains you wouldn't want to get side-tracked into wondering what exactly a langoustine was, so lets stick to prawns for now. But bear in mind, these are really big *vicious* prawns.

So these big, vicious prawns sit in people's heads and tell them what to do. Unless some kindly relative straps the person down, makes them drink fizzy white liquid and then injects nail-polish remover into the backs of their heads. (Do *not* try this at home.) The prawn then comes wriggling out (if you happen to be the heroine), or, alternatively of course, it doesn't (if you happen to be the series villain).

So far so good. Our doughty hero, Mr Lone Guard, knows that (a) the aliens have landed, (b) there are people with prawns in their heads and (c) there's a secret government conspiracy conspiring to stop people finding out that the aliens have landed or that there are people with prawns in their heads. As his lovely, young, and luckily de-prawned, wife is Jackie Kennedy's aide, he hits upon the cunning plan of telling the president. The secret government conspiracy (see [c] above) then arranges to shoot Kennedy, presumably on the grounds that if they shoot Lone Guard and his prawn-free spouse there'll be no series and if somebody doesn't shoot Kennedy, well, what will conspiracy theorists do for the next 30 years?

You can see the problem. If they could have made the serious side work it might have been a scary sort of a series. Heaven only knows that with de-prawning, conspiratorial shootings and the odd bit of amateur surgery there's enough gruesomeness to get the programme out of the six o'clock ghetto and into late night cultism. However grue isn't the same thing as fear, and *Dark Skies* is definitely only gruesome and not fearsome: we look away when someone gets nail-polish removed but we can safely sleep with the light off after it's over.

Rather in the way you waited for the armour-plating scene in *The A-Team*, in *Dark Skies* you wait for the

"well, we've got you but we're going to let you go this time" scene. As regularly as clockwork, the hero and/or heroine fall into the hands of the government conspirators and as regularly as clockwork the conspirators find a reason to let them go or fail to notice they've escaped on their own.

And then there's the historical event tie-in of the week, where the death of Kennedy, the Space Race, the Beatles' US tour, whatever, provides the framework for the week's episode. This makes for a certain amount of repetition as well as a certain loss of suspense. Whatever it is, you can be sure either the people with prawns in their heads done it, or the anti-prawn faction done it, or else it happened anyway but there were definitely prawns, conspirators and doughty heroes involved in it

TUBE CORN

Wendy
Bradley





Above: J T Walsh as Colonel Prank Bach, recruits idealistic congressional aide John Loegaard (Eric Close) into Majestic 12 to seek out UFOs and aliens, having failed to frighten him off his own search. Previous page: Megan Ward plays John Loegaard's fiancée, Kimberley Sayers. Here, needless to say, she is being bothered in her bedroom by the aliens.

somewhere. You also get an introductory voice-over from our doughty hero which cuts off even the possibility he'll ask for a pay rise and they'll kill him off for a recast.

In the hands of someone who had the gall to spice it with wit without sending it up too far it could have finished up as a *Due South*: all it would have taken would have been a little relish. Or it could have bypassed wit and gone straight for weird and been out there in *Twin Peaks* territory, if only it had used a little imagination. As it is, it isn't bad enough to be funny and it isn't funny enough to be fun. A programme that can tell us that the truth is down the corridor, second on the right, really ought to be able to do more with it.

Similarly there is very little to laugh about in *Space: Above and Beyond* (BBC 2, Fridays) although the cynical might find several elements

to laugh at. We are in the near future this time rather than the near past, but again there are alien invaders, this time not using subtle mind-games or rampant prawns but straightforward shoot-'em-up spacecraft.

Now, I have been rather worried about this particular bunch of alien invaders (who are more of your large beetle types than your prawn-brained humans) ever since the pilot episode when our heroes captured one and tried, on humanitarian grounds, to give it a drink of water. We should probably agree to differ on the foolishness or otherwise of trying to feed alien life-forms through orifices which, in the absence of any meaningful communication, we have no way of identifying as mouths, gills, ears or, for all we know, sphincters. However it does seem to me that we might expect elite troops to think of mentioning to someone that squirting water into enemy ears

appears to be quite satisfyingly, abruptly and violently fatal. Call me an old romantic but I can't help feeling that aliens that go gruesomely dead when wet aren't likely to pose that much of a threat to life on Earth as we know it.

However our heroes have other problems – and, in the absence of a cute enough hero, a solid enough plot or a persuasive enough atmosphere to stop my mind wandering irrelevantly, I can't help spending my time worrying about their problems. They are supposed to be expensively trained marines, with special skills in piloting those cute little WW2 spaceplanes, and yet they keep being wasted on minor tasks that have handy plot-sized holes ready cut in them. For example, there was the week when they found themselves sent to guard a mining installation. The breathtaking logistics of this kept sidetracking me for vital moments so that I swear I must have missed a bit. The secret password they used to identify themselves to the miners and each other – did they just radio it to the miners? Then why didn't the bad guys pick it up and run with it? Other than the inherent bad-guy sense of fair play, of course.

However there is some actual science-fictional thought mixed up in this somewhere: there are the tanks, genetically engineered humans raised in vats until they are 18. What would it be like to be born fully formed? With no childhood, no past, to teach you to how to be human? See what I mean, a real-life science-fiction meme. Sadly, however, the meme is just used to give the tall dark and angst-ridden one in the cast his excuse for being tall dark and angst-ridden. I also regularly boggle at the nipple neck – a tag of superfluous flesh on the neck which identifies a tank so their human rights can be more conveniently violated – I mean, would you design your genetically engineered superbeings to have an identifying mark? And if you did, wouldn't you expect your superbeings to have the simple wit to organize a bit of plastic surgery? Even, if necessary, a bit of gruesome self-surgery?

Each of the lead characters has a backstory meme which could have been interesting – my parents were killed by androids, my girlfriend was spacenapped by the aliens – but which, on the evidence so far, is being used in a fairly feeble way to excuse improbable lapses in military discipline or to fill in the handy plot-sized holes in the universe. Still, after the long drought of TV science fiction we should, I suppose, be grateful when the newly connected supplies turn out to have some genuine flavour after all.

Even if it is only prawn flavour.

Wendy Bradley

Below: Paul Wang and Nathan Lane star in *Space: Above and Beyond*



When Molly bumped into Elvis at the cheese-counter on singles night in the local supermarket you could have knocked her over with a feather.

"Are you *him*," she asked, "or do you just look like him?"

"Ah'm *him*," he replied in his usual laid-back drawl.

She still had her doubts. He didn't look a day older than he had in *Viva Las Vegas*, and she was pretty certain that he'd got very fat before he died, because of all the junk food he ate. She sneaked a look at the stuff in his trolley, and was surprised to see that he'd stocked up with fresh fruit and veg before coming to collect his Gruyère and Port Salut. Even the bread was wholemeal. All in all, he was putting on a much better show than she was with all her frozen pizzas and mild Cheddar slices – which weren't the ideal goods to be seen with on singles night, when image was everything.

Elvis explained to Molly that he'd faked his death in order to take part in the clandestine clinical trials of a new immortality serum. The entire experimental sample had recently been brought over to England because secret agents of the FDA had almost figured out where their Californian hideaway was, probably because Charlie Manson had opened his big mouth once too often. Howard Hughes had fixed it for Elvis and Patsy Cline to stay with Bob Maxwell and Lord Lucan, although the safe house in Wandsworth wasn't really big enough for the four of them, with Maxwell being such a boorish type.

"Patsy normally does the shopping," Elvis said mournfully, "but she ain't feelin' too good right now."

"Lovesick, I guess," Molly said, thinking that she probably knew exactly how poor Patsy felt. She'd been called crazy more than once herself.

Elvis told her that the serum tests had been an unexpectedly long haul, with several prototypes not quite living up to expectations, but that the latest version really seemed to be getting down to the nitty-gritty. It tasted like scouring-powder but it was doing him so much good that he was just about back to his physical peak.

"E's used to taste a bit like scouring-powder too," she observed wistfully, swiftly adding, "or so it's said."

Molly realized that she had had a marvellous stroke of luck. Elvis didn't even know that it was singles night at Sainsbury's, because Patsy hadn't tipped him off, and none of the local harpies had been quick enough to lock trolleys with him because they were still hanging around sherry and spirits hoping to catch a few slummers down from Chelsea.

"Look, Elvis," she said, "I'm not being funny or anything, but I really think you ought to stick with me at least until we get through the checkout. A good-looking guy like you could easily get mobbed, because just being here on singles night puts out all the wrong signals to the slags from the estate. *Your* address might be Wandsworth, but where we're actually standing is definitely Putney." She paused for breath and a moment's consideration, then decided that if she was in for a penny she might as well be in for a pound. "In fact," she continued, "if I were you, I'd stick with me all the way back to the hostel. You don't have to come in for coffee, of course, and it wouldn't be Gold Blend if you did, but you'd be safer going home from there than you would if I left you drifting in here – honestly!"

When Molly Met Elvis

Francis
Amery

She was sure that she could have put it better, but once Elvis had had a good look round and had seen what was lurking behind the yoghurt counter his natural paranoia came to the rescue.

"Ah'm with you, ma'am," he said – and he was, all the way to the front door but not a step further.

Molly and Elvis had agreed to meet again the following week, at the cheaper end of the wine lane. She wasn't sure that he would turn up, even if Patsy were still under the weather. After all, being an authentic aristocrat, Lucky Lucan was probably the kind of guy who'd take his turn at the shopping, even if the likes of Captain Bob wouldn't. *Noblesse oblige*, wasn't that what they said?

As it turned out, though, there he was, large as life and twice as natural – and not a rhinestone in sight, mercifully. They chatted together for an hour or more, passing the tinned tuna and baked beans so often that Molly almost felt embarrassed, even though she'd made sure this time that there was nothing in her trolley anyone would have looked down her nose at even if she'd been in Marks & Spencer's.

Molly told Elvis that although she was far too young ever to have been a true fan of his, she'd really loved all the films – especially the one in which he sang "Teddy Bear."

Since the divorce and the kids being taken into care,

of course, watching films on TV was pretty much all she did. The hostel actually had cable, so she could watch the ones on Bravo and TNT as well as all the ones normal people got to see, provided that she was quick enough to grab both remotes and brave enough to stand firm against the spitting schizo. She didn't explain all that to Elvis, of course; she didn't want him to think that she might be the kind of person who was so desperate for a little human warmth that the people she saw on the screen had become her social life.

She did explain, however, that although she was practically a regular at singles night in Sainsbury's, she only came to watch. At any rate, she was usually far too shy to strike up conversations, so he was really pretty special.

"Ah always knew *that*," Elvis said, "even when ah warn't no more than knee-high to a cricket."

While they were on the way back to the hostel Molly explained that in England cricket was a game, rather like baseball – except, of course, for the bouncers and the LBW rule. Elvis held up his end of the conversation by explaining the ins and outs of being a guinea pig for an immortality serum, and his reasons for becoming involved with the project. Fame was all very well, he told her, but it forced you to live life at such a pitch of intensity that it almost became unbearable. When he'd been the king he'd felt all the time like a moth zooming back and forth across a candle-flame, just asking to get his wings singed. He had decided readily enough that he wanted something different. He wanted his life back again – and that meant getting his *youth* back again, because when you came right down to it youth was the one and only place where life was really *at*.

Molly knew exactly what he meant. She supposed that everyone who arrived at the magic age of 35 – half way through the Biblical threescore-years-and-ten – looked back with fierce regret at the time when they were 17-and-a-half. In her heart of hearts, of course, she conceded that even if she could have another shot, knowing what she did now, she probably wouldn't have been able to do any better, but at least she'd still have been in the game. She'd still have had a fistful of lottery tickets, and the hope that one of them might come up.

If someone had offered her the chance to get into the clinical trials with Patsy and Elvis she'd have taken it like a shot – but she knew better than to ask.

When they eventually parted, Molly said: "I hope you won't mind me saying so, but for someone who's been rejuvenated by the elixir of life, you're looking just the teensiest bit peaky. Thinner, too."

Elvis admitted that the newest version of the serum had now begun to throw up one or two unexpected side-effects, and that he was indeed losing weight.

"Believe me, honey," he said, "it ain't nothin' they can't take care of. These guys are the best." He said it with the air of a man who'd grown used to expecting the best, and used to expecting that the best would be provided.

"I hope you're right," she said, "for all our sakes."

She couldn't help remembering the endless catalogue of her own side-effects, and how even her side-effects had begun to have side-effects. "Unexpected synergies" was what the doctor up at the Maudsley had called them – by which he meant that she was taking so many of the damn drugs they were interfering with one another in a manner which was almost as promis-

cuous as her sex-life way back when.

She was past all that now, of course. She was a survivor, not so very unlike Elvis in spite of the difference in their years and their opportunities.

The week after that, when they met at the muesli-and-bran-flakes end of Breakfast Cereals, Molly was immediately struck by the fact that Elvis was looking very peaky indeed. In fact, he looked like the hostel-manager after a particularly protracted bout with the manic depressive in the first floor back. There was a distinct greenish tinge about his face and he had gone past thin to almost emaciated.

"Are you sure you're eating properly?" she asked, checking his trolley. The smoked salmon and champagne were reassuring in their way, although she had a sneaking suspicion that they might be for Lucky and the Captain. She didn't know whether she ought to be worried about the presence of the bumper pack of grill-steaks, the chocolate digestives and the Coco Pops.

"Ah'm fine," he assured her. "Ah'd-a stayed home if ah warn't."

Elvis went on to explain that the new immortality serum was working a little *too* well. Molly didn't understand all the technical details, but she figured that he was a little hazy on that side of things himself. In fact, he probably knew less than she did about active liposomes and free radicals because he rarely watched the ads on TV and never read *Marie Claire*. She gathered that although the serum had conferred immortality on his own cells, and had done a really ace job of smartening up his innards, the bacteria and nematodes that were normally resident in his and everybody's else's body had begun to mop up the elixir with ever-increasing alacrity. Apparently, they were enjoying something of a population explosion in consequence.

"It's just a glitch," Elvis said. "There've been glitches before. Ah trust these guys – if it warn't for them, ah'd be dead already. Don't you worry your pretty little head none."

It was the first time Elvis had called her pretty. She knew, of course, that he didn't really mean it. She had been *sort of* pretty once, but that was before the creases had begun to set in around her eyes and her mouth. She quailed at the thought that he might one day get to see her stretch-marks – but once she'd done quailing she felt a kind of naughty thrill, because she really did want him to see her stretch-marks, one day – provided that his present condition proved temporary.

In the meantime, it was really nice that he was being so polite.

"Well," she opined, "there *is* a limit to the trust you can put in doctors. Believe me, I know. I dare say you have the very very best, but they're only doctors when all's said and done, and all doctors are alike in some ways. For instance, they tell you over and over again that things will be all right, even when they know damn well they won't. There are some things, you see, that are simply beyond the reach of medical wisdom. Ask Patsy – *she* knows."

Elvis groaned when Molly said that, and Molly wondered whether it had been a bad move to bring Patsy's name into what was supposed to be an intimate *tête-à-tête*. If she had learned one thing from all she'd been

through, it was that one should never, never, never start talking about other women to blokes that one fancied. It led so easily to their making unfavourable comparisons.

Luckily, Elvis let the subject drop, and began reminiscing about the good old days, and why *Blue Hawaii* was a much better film than the critics had ever given it credit for, and what a compliment it was to have your nether regions deemed too obscene to be seen on TV. She hadn't much in the way of nostalgic memories to offer in return, but she tried her best not to be entirely reduced to such interpolations as "Oh yes, I saw that one" and she managed to bite her tongue on the only occasion that the fateful words "I wasn't even *born* then!" rose unbidden to her lips. Fortunately, he didn't seem all that curious about her, so she didn't have to get too close to memories of the more uncomfortable kind.

He was just as sweet as ever when he said goodnight outside the hostel, although he was obviously in some discomfort. Although she felt guilty about thinking it, she couldn't help thinking that he wasn't quite the man she'd imagined him to be.

He kissed her, but it wasn't nearly as nice as she'd hoped it would be.

The following week, when Molly met Elvis in Frozen Foods, between the crinkle-cut chips and the chopped spinach, things had obviously got a lot worse. Her heart sank when she saw him, although she had been nursing the fear all week that this was the way things were bound to go.

It seemed almost as if Elvis was visibly rotting. He was a terrible shade of putrescent grey, and his breath stank. Even so, he was still cheerful. He assured Molly yet again that it was just a snag that the scientists had to work out, and that he wasn't in the least worried.

"After all," he said, "it ain't as if ah can die, now, is it? Ah'm immortal, right? There ain't nothin' the viruses an' all the other parasites can do to *me*."

Molly couldn't help remembering the way they'd exchanged that first kiss, and that even though it had just been a peck on the cheek, it had put a real dent in her hopes for the future of the relationship. She had realized, on due reflection, that his skin had felt curiously fluid and that it had tasted ever so faintly of mould. He hadn't mentioned fungus when he'd been explaining the problem of the immortal parasites but she supposed that everything was included. She supposed that it would be ironic, in a way, if the quest to secure human immortality merely managed to preserve and empower all the myriad forms of human corruption – but she couldn't quite bend her mind to matters of abstract philosophy. She had more important things to consider.

What if he wanted to kiss her again tonight? Would she be able to bear it? Should she even try?

She realized as she posed these questions that the answers were already inherent within them. If such uneasy thoughts needed to be raised, the end had to be in sight.

"Anyways," he drawled, "if'n you think ah look bad, you should see Alan Turing an' Albert Einstein. Ah bumped into 'em last week at the clinic. Whoo-ee! Ah've told the big guys over an' over that they shouldn't have gotten into charity work, but ah guess it's understand-

able they have this thing about their brother egg-heads."

"Of course it's understandable," Molly said, feeling a slight pang of irritation. "After all, without in any way questioning your own contribution to 20th-century culture, I must say that I couldn't possibly have much respect for people who'd try to save the likes of Robert Maxwell and Lord Lucan while allowing Einstein to be committed to oblivion. On the other hand, I'm a little bit surprised to hear you mention his name, because there was a programme on TV only last week about this man – Japanese, I think he was – who was trying to find out exactly what had happened to Einstein's brain, which had been put in a glass jar after he was buried."

"It was a fake," Elvis explained. "Brains are a dime a dozen. Sex-appeal is somethin' else."

Unfortunately, Molly thought, Elvis's sex-appeal was no longer very evident – and now that she was forced to confront the issue, his brain hadn't seemed much to write home about even on that first magic night when they'd met by the cheese counter. What was so special about Port Salut, when all was said and done? It was right there on the shelf, just like the mild Cheddar and the Dairylea slices.

Even while Elvis was walking her home that night, Molly knew that her dream had begun to fade – that this wasn't the turning-point in her life that she'd hoped it would be. It wasn't Elvis's fault – he really was doing his best, and underneath it all he was a really nice guy, but it just wasn't right for *her*.

"Ah was better in *Jailhouse Rock*, o'course," Elvis observed, with the half-hurt, half-apologetic air of a man who had just realized that his audience had lost the thread of his argument.

"Loved it," Molly said tokenistically. "*Kid Creole* too. Loved them all."

"Ah was young then. *Really* young."

"I wasn't even born," Molly answered, hardly feeling the half-hearted reflexive nip of her teeth upon her tongue.

They didn't kiss when they said goodbye, and the way his shoulders drooped as he trudged way into the darkness made her suspect that for him too, a dream had begun to die.

Molly was surprised to see Elvis the following week, given the appalling condition he was in. She was astonished that Patsy and the others had let him come out to do the shopping – so astonished, in fact, that she hazarded a guess that they had no idea he was here. Nevertheless, he was right where he said he'd be, next to the dumpbin where they put the goods that were past their sell-by dates so that old-age pensioners could pick them up dirt cheap.

His trolley was empty, and he was showing no interest at all in the goods on the shelves, so it was obvious that he had made the trip just to see her.

In view of everything, she felt that it would be terribly unfair to string him along, so she decided to come right out with it.

"Look, Elvis," she said, "I'm sorry but it's just not working. My social worker says that I have an outside chance of getting my kids back if I can only demonstrate that I'm back on an even keel. I'm still taking my medication regularly, but it's just the tranks and

the Prozac now – I'm off the other stuff for good. From now on, the only whizzing I'll be doing is round and round the aisles of the blessed with a fully-loaded trolley, and not on singles night either. I have to put the kids first, you see. It's just not the right time for someone like me to get involved with someone like you."

He protested, of course. In fact, he protested with an eloquence and fervour that she'd never seen in him before, not even in the very best of his films. For just a few moments, she could almost have believed that he'd meant every word of "Heartbreak Hotel."

Elvis told her that there was always a let-down effect when a person met an idol, whether the idol turned out to have feet of clay or not, because what getting to know someone actually *meant* was that you had to relate to them as a normal human being, not as something altogether outside the ordinary run of things.

"Tell that to Lisa Marie," she said, although she bit her lip afterwards in case it sounded too cruel.

As it happened, he didn't understand. His eyeballs were full of immortal worms and he didn't watch the TV news any more because the picture was just a blur of meaningless colour.

He told her that she had to look beyond the image and the artifice to the lonely human soul within, with sympathy and understanding, and appreciate that underneath all the glamour and the glitz there was nothing that mattered except a vulnerable human heart, beating in harmony with her own.

"That's the trouble," she said. "Beating, yes – harmony, no." It didn't seem right to add a comment to the effect that those four words summed up her whole life, although

it would certainly have added a delicate spice of wit to what was turning out to be a rather painful conversation.

He protested some more, and then he started pleading with her. It was all rather undignified, and Molly became embarrassed. Fortunately, with it being Sainsbury's, and Putney, nobody paused to give them a second glance. She wondered whether it would have been any different if they'd been in a K-Mart in Tennessee.

To cut a long story short, Elvis really fell apart – but Molly just kept on telling herself over and over again that it wasn't her fault. She had her own life to lead, her own fate to seek, and there simply wasn't room just now for an immortal superstar and all the immortal corruption he was carrying around inside himself.

In the end, he became too annoying to be borne a single moment longer.

"If I were you, Elvis. I'd try to pull myself together," Molly advised him. "I know you've been hurt – wounded, even – but you have to be strong. It's not the end of the world, you know. Mortal or immortal, worm-eaten or worm-ridden, idol or idler, life is what you make it. That's my philosophy, at any rate."

It was, too. At least, it was *now*.

She couldn't help feeling a distinct thrill of triumph when he had to admit that she was right.

Francis Amery's previous stories here were "Self-Sacrifice" (issue 54), "Alfonso the Wise" (issue 105) and "Lucifer's Comet" (issue 111). Another story of his appeared in the anthology *Tales of the Wandering Jew* (Dedalus, 1991). A resident of Berkshire, he is an expert in French fantastic literature.

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Wingèd Chariot

Ben Jeapes

The funeral was straight out of a Gothic novel. The wind blew through the churchyard in gusts, up the valley from the sea; the sky was overcast and every surface was damp and slick from the drizzle.

The dead child's family stood around the grave, sheltered by the crowd of fellow villagers. Funerals here were communal events. Two men supported the mother as she wept and the funeral crowd held her in their hearts, but most eyes were on the vicar of St Mary's church who stood at the head of the grave. *See how he shares her pain, they were thinking. Listen to his voice catch. Dr Morgan's a good man.*

Dr Morgan knew this and could happily have done without it. He was in Porthperron because the place was all but cut off from civilization, but as a corollary even people from the village over the hill were as foreign as the French, and almost as distrusted. Napoleon's Grande Armée could ravage Europe and these people would only hear rumours, and suspect anyone from outside the village all the more.

Naturally they were distrustful of their new rector. He was *educated*, they would say, as though explaining a physical deformity that polite people did not comment on. His strange way of speaking was explained, in their broadest West Country, as *city*.

Now they know I'm one of them, Morgan thought, as he buried himself in the final section of the service. *I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me...* It would take something like this to make them accept me and my life will be easier from now on. But, of all the things to bring us together, did it have to be a funeral?

"A tragic thing, Dr Morgan. Poor little Anne. A tragic thing," muttered the verger as he removed his parson's cloak and hung it up to dry.

"Indeed it is, Mr Cole," Morgan said with the degree of distraction he tended to use towards subordinates who were making conversation. He rubbed his hands. "Fire lit?"

The vicarage was cold and draughty and Morgan dreaded to think of the damp problems, but it was a sturdy edifice that stood up to the worst the sea wind and the salt spray could throw at it. Once the fire in the study was blazing away the damp was banished and a man could feel quite civilized in the snug, warm atmosphere. Cole had run on ahead to see that the fire was well established in the grate.

"Still, as it says, 'I am the resurrection and the life,' eh, Dr Morgan?"

"It certainly does, Mr Cole," Morgan agreed, thinking of the small body lying white and cold on its bed and the obscenely hard mass beneath the soft skin –

"Brandy?" he said. He wished Cole would leave but he felt the man deserved the offer of hospitality. Cole

was reasonably bright and had what passed for an education, though his intelligence had been blighted by years of isolation in Porthperron.

"Oh, thank you, Dr Morgan," Cole said. "Don't mind if I do."

The two men sipped their drinks together. Morgan hoped it would take Cole's one-track mind off the subject.

"Poor little mite," Cole mused, gazing into the depths of the glass. "Younger than usual, you know. I really respect you for coming to Porthperron, Dr Morgan, knowing our reputation, and your predecessor leaving because he couldn't stand it, and all that. And there'll be more, believe me."

Of course there will be. Closed community, interbreeding, Morgan thought. No opportunities, no need to move on, to spread the gene pool. A freak mutation, a tendency towards cancer, probably developed within the last century or so and consequently reinforced by said breeding. Not helped by your ancestors siting your village on top of a naturally radioactive pile of granite.

"But there's no fighting it, is there, Dr Morgan?" Cole added.

A shot of carcinophages straight into the heart of the tumour? Not much else. Morgan had to remind himself, once again, of his role in the village. "Only prayer, Mr Cole, only prayer," he said.

"Of course, of course, Dr Morgan" Cole said at once. "Still, I've heard of people cutting lumps out –"

Ye Gods! Morgan thought. In this day and age, before Lister, before anaesthetic? I'd rather die.

"Very probably, Mr Cole," he said, draining his glass in one go. "Now, if you'll excuse me –"

"Oh... ah... yes." Cole looked at his glass, still barely touched, perhaps wondering where the vicar learnt to drain a glass of brandy like that. "Well... thank you, Dr Morgan. See you at Evensong. I'll ask Mrs Pentreath to show me out."

"Goodbye, Mr Cole."

Morgan woke with a shout echoing in his ears. For a moment he lay, staring into the darkness. The house creaked and breathed around him, but he had grown used to it and it no longer kept him awake at night. He had been dreaming, with a vividness that he had never known in his previous life but was getting used to now. He had been back at his seat at the great black table. All his friends from the Board had sat around him. Poulsen, Carradine, Siedle, all deferring to the figure who sat at the end.

He had known that his guilt was evident to them all. He fairly radiated it. It was unnecessary for the Director to look directly at him, but look at him the Director did. And point.

"Traitor!" Eyes turned on him...

...and now he felt a sense of devastating loss, a vast emptiness inside him. The Director thought him a traitor, he had lost the goodwill of the man he had worshipped –

No! Reason pushed its way up through the haze of fuddled and sleepy thought that clouded his mind. He had parted with the Director on the best of terms and had never seen the man again. The guilt had come later, with the knowledge that probably none of the others had escaped. Except, perhaps, Carradine...

His heart slowed and a flood of relief poured over him. A dream, that was all. A dream.

It was curious that he had ended up in Cornwall again. One of life's little ironies, of the kind that he was getting tired of.

They had honeymooned in Cornwall his first time in the West Country, land of Jamaica Inn and King Arthur and tin mines. They took a small, self-catering chalet north of the Lizard.

Halcyon days. Pre-Director, pre-pain, pre-guilt. Exploring the coves and bays, trekking on the coastal paths, letting their love blossom. Free, alone, together, long before the days when Security would have known exactly where they were and would have had several agents in the vicinity, just in case.

And, somewhere in that fortnight of bliss, Peggy got started. The child they had wanted, a little earlier than planned but what of it?

Carradine was the first outside the family to be called and he could barely hide his grin. They had last seen each other when Carradine was in a morning suit and white carnation, managing the guests as though to the Best Man's manner born.

"Already?" he said. "That's what I call fast work! Say, you know that organization I was telling you about..."

Barbara Pentreath was white as a sheet, but fear didn't overcome her natural modesty.

"I couldn't, Dr Morgan!" she protested. "It... it wouldn't be right, no, no, it's just a small thing, nothing to worry you with –"

"Mrs Pentreath!" Morgan soothed his housekeeper. He had never been good at keeping his temper in the face of ignorance and unreason, and the practice he had gained in Porthperron was wearing thin. "Mrs Pentreath, I know about these things. You must let me see, or at least feel." He knew what it was and so did she, but he had to know how bad.

"Oh, Dr Morgan –" Mrs Pentreath wailed. Morgan's temper snapped.

"Listen, woman, pretend I'm your husband and trust me, right?" Before she could answer he had slipped his hand inside her bodice. She froze, uncertain whether to scream or faint, but he only kept it there a second. It was long enough. A lump where no lump should be, but not yet a large lump.

"Thank you, Mrs Pentreath," he said, stiff and unbending as he walked back to his desk. Oh God, it followed him everywhere. She stood quaking in front of his desk like a guilty schoolgirl. "How long?" he asked.

"Oh two or three days, Dr Morgan," she said, still not sure whether or not her rector had just assaulted her. Morgan calculated two or three days, plus the days she would have subtracted for fear of being thought to exaggerate,

plus the time it would have taken her to pluck up the courage to come and see him, plus the time the lump had taken to become noticeable in the first place...

"Does Mr Pentreath know?"

"He it was he who suggested I come to you, Dr Morgan. I don't know why, I just..." She trailed off in misery.

Why? Morgan thought. Because I'm the vicar, I'm *educated*, I can solve everything. Why can't you people solve your own problems?

He came to a decision and drew pen and paper towards him. "Thank you, Mrs Pentreath," he said. "Send Mr Pentreath in, would you?"

He carefully wrote his name and address at the top of the paper. Then he sat and thought.

You can't do this. Lie low, don't involve yourself...

...but he was fond of the couple who kept the vicarage for him, as he was fond of all the villagers in his charge. He started writing.

He had no notes or records on him; everything he wrote had to come from memory. He had to think down to the best level that this society could provide, remembering his basic training and extrapolating backwards. He would never get anything of the quality that he was used to; he would have to make do with the merely adequate. The barely adequate.

He looked up at the end of the letter and only then realized that Arthur Pentreath had been standing there for several minutes, patiently waiting for the rector to finish. Morgan neatly folded and sealed the missal without saying anything, and handed the man the finished article. The look in Pentreath's eyes was accusing; perhaps his wife had told him that the rector wasn't doing anything.

"I want this sent to London urgently," said Morgan. "Can you do it?"

Pentreath really did look sullen. "I'll need a cart to get to town," he said.

Morgan unlocked the safe, careful that Pentreath didn't see precisely how much he had in it, and took out some coins. "Will this cover it?"

"It will."

"Then do it."

It was the parting of the ways. The Director's jet had taken off and the rest of the Board had dispersed. He and Carradine were together, as they always had been. They had a pack of supplies, food and medicines, and they took turns carrying it as they picked their way through the ruins and stayed away from the sound of fighting.

"Think he'll make it?" Carradine asked.

"Should do." They ducked as rockets soared overhead. "Think we'll make it?"

"Should do." The Sub-Director for Science looked in the direction in which their leader's aircraft had flown. "You realize that after him, you and I are next on the wanted list?"

"We didn't start the fighting." A formation of fighters flashed by on the horizon, fortunately in the opposite direction to the Director. "God, I wish I knew who they were."

Carradine looked at him askance. "Never did believe in responsibility, did you? Never did believe in the 'all-for-one, one-for-all' principle, hey?"

"Which is why the Director has just fled, leaving us

behind!"

"That's a lie!" Carradine roared. "The Directorate survives for as long as he is alive, and –"

"My God, he's taken you in, hasn't he? You really believe he cares –"

Carradine's fist smashed into his mouth, sending him reeling backwards to trip over a pile of rubble. "Don't ever, ever begin to doubt, you hear me? You think you can stand alone? You ungrateful bastard. He saved us, remember? He gave us all our dreams. Would you ever have had your clinics to play with without him, hey? It was him who made it all possible! One day, one day, this miserable world will realize what a great man he was, but only if we stick together. Got that? *Got that?*"

He gazed up at his oldest friend. The friend who had got him onto the Board, introduced him to the Director. Blood trickled down his chin. "We mustn't fight," he mumbled. "We mustn't fight."

They spent the night in a hollow in the ruins. One of them slept.

The other could not. He had his escape planned and he intended to use it. Let Carradine cling to the dream of the Directorate. The Directorate was dead. When Carradine awoke in the morning, the Sub-Director for Health would be gone, taking the pack with him.

Who could he trust? Very few, very few. Once he would have had an entire hospital staff to draw on. He would have been in an operating room, the most modern, the best. Trained nurses, trained doctors.

Now he was reduced to Pentreath and Cole. One had a vested interest in the matter; the other was loyal to his rector and had seen enough of the world outside Porthperron to take on the new concepts that Morgan introduced.

Against all the odds, he had made them understand the need for chloroform and antisepsis. No one could argue with the need for a patient oblivious to pain, but the idea of tiny little creatures making wounds septic was harder to accept. They simply took his word for it until Morgan removed the lump from Mrs Pentreath and the wound, cleaned with the chemicals that had arrived from London, healed within days. Then they truly *believed*.

Anatomy was different.

Mrs Pentreath's lump had been a simple subcutaneous tumour: other tumours in the village might not be so easy. They would come in all the shapes, sizes and forms that cancer could throw at them. They might require lengthy operations. The tendency, for which Morgan thanked God, was for the tumours to appear in tissue, not organs... until they metastasized. *That* was usually when people complained of them.

The vicarage study was a poor substitute for a lecture hall but it sufficed. Diagrams, hand drawn by Morgan, hung on the walls. Morgan was pointing to a map of the major blood vessels.

"You can feel your pulse in several places," he said. "Wrist, neck. What you feel is the blood pumping through the arteries there. It is vital to remember exactly where the arteries are. Blood spurts out of a severed artery in a stream that could reach across this room. We don't have the equipment to deal with such a situation, so the patient would die." He put the marker down and

unbuttoned his shirt. "Mr Cole. You'll be doing most of the cutting. Show me the course my aorta takes."

Cole was wrong by about two inches. Morgan suppressed a groan.

"Wrong, Mr Cole. Wrong, wrong, wrong. It's here. *Here*. You'll go merrily cutting away where you think is safe and there will be yet another funeral!"

Finally he decided he had taught them enough for one night. "But I must say one more thing, Mr Cole, and you, Mr Pentreath. No one must be told where you learnt these skills. I want the operations performed in the utmost secrecy. The village will know but no outsider must be told, no one who was not born and bred in Porthperron. And the operations must only be performed on tumours, as and when they develop. Now, please, give me your word that this will be so."

They gave it, reluctantly.

"You're making it sound like you won't be here, Dr Morgan," Pentreath said, looking him in the eye.

Morgan returned the gaze. *Mr Pentreath, I'm about to introduce an enormous anachronism into this area and you think I intend to hang around?* "Consider all possibilities, Mr Pentreath."

"Well, I hope you're staying, Dr Morgan," Cole said, "cos it's all very well pointing at where your ay-orter should be, but the only way I'm ever really going to learn is by cutting someone up, properly."

Morgan looked at him for a moment. Then: "The lesson is over, gentlemen. Thank you for your time. Mr Cole, will you stay behind?"

"Sir," Carradine said, "this is..."

"Of course, of course!" The Director was a small man, as Napoleon was small, but glowing with an inner energy. The Director took his hand and shook it firmly. It was not the frantic pumping that he was expecting; somehow it was all the more sincere in its brevity.

Their host sat them down. It was the kind of apartment he was expecting large, comfortable and with a panoramic view of the city lights below.

"Carradine has told me a lot about you," the Director said. "You two go back to university days, don't you?"

"Further than that, sir." Sir! Was he calling the man Sir already?

"And I've studied you, ever since Carradine told me you might be interested in joining us. Are you?"

"I am, sir! You've accomplished –" He didn't usually gush but for the first time now could be quite sincere. "You've accomplished such marvels, such wonders –"

The Director waved a hand in modest self-deprecation. "One day I'll tell you how," he said. "But let's start with you. You are... um... is *unorthodox* the right word? Yes, unorthodox in your outlook."

The blood rushed to his face. He blurted out, he could not help it: "I'm unorthodox, sir, because I tell the truth! I can save lives, I can help like no other surgeon has done! Hippocrates never even knew about genetics, so why should some archaic oath in his name prevent us from doing what is needed to study the subject? Don't they realize the good that..."

He saw the cool amusement on the Director's face and the horror on Carradine's, and he bit his tongue in mid-rant. He lowered his voice back to its more usual tones. "I tell them that and they disagree, sir," he muttered.

"That's all."

The Director was nodding, slowly, wisely. "Let me tell you about a man in torment," he said. "A noble, clever man who is prevented from doing what he knows he must. He knows the pain of cutting someone open, looking at the damage, then quietly sewing the patient back up and giving him a pat on the head and telling him that chemotherapy can do wonderful things nowadays."

"And then a blow is struck right into the heart of his family. He diagnoses his own daughter's condition and is powerless to help –"

"Stop it!"

"– his marriage crumbles –"

"Shut up!"

The Director's eyes were shrewd. "You know this man?"

"You know I do! You know –"

"Yes, I know. I told you I studied you." The Director was up and pacing about. "Listen. I want to make you an offer. A place on the Board. Sub-Director for Health. Complete charge of our medical research programme, all our resources at your disposal and no ethical committees to fuss over you. Interested?"

He felt the ground giving way under him. His heart pounded, his head swam. "Sir!" he said. "If you... if you think I could..."

"Good!" The Director moved over to the drinks cabinet and retrieved three glasses. Already filled – the Director had known he would take the offer. "You're on the Board as of now. Congratulations."

They drank to the future.

"I got you just in time, to tell the truth," the Director said, swirling the wine in its glass. "I wanted all the Sub-Directorships filled in time for the next move."

"Sir?" Both he and Carradine were attentive now. The Director stood with his back to them, to gaze out of the large studio window at the lights of the city.

"At present," he said, "we have money and influence but little else. It's time to expand."

"I'll tell this to the Board tomorrow, so keep it quiet until then. In three days time I will make an offer to the western governments. 'Let me help you. The Directorate will run your economies for you.'" He turned back to them and gave a crooked smile. "We couldn't do it worse than them. I think they'll accept."

Cole had gone pale.

"Dr Morgan, really?"

"You said it yourself, Mr Cole. The only way to learn."

"Yes, but..." The verger stared at Morgan. Morgan's knowledge had inspired a hero-worship in the man and now Morgan wondered if he had gone too far in depending on it.

"Mr Cole, I genuinely want you to learn how to fight the cancer," he said. "Don't you want to be part of this healing process? Don't you?"

"But... dead..."

"Dead, and of natural causes. An unmutated body, and we've only just buried her. She won't have decayed yet. Once you have been properly tutored, we will have her reburied. The thought is distasteful, but if you think this is the only way you can learn, we must do it."

"I –"

"Mr Cole, you yourself said it was a tragic thing, her dying. This way it can have some use for all the people

who loved her!"

Cole looked miserably at Morgan. "When?"

"This evening. We can put her in the crypt. No one will see."

Anne Tresidder, died aged seven years and two months, beloved daughter and so forth. The two men soon found the grave in the dark. It was only two days old and easily re-excavated.

Morgan pried the coffin lid off and managed to stand it upright. He had been holding his breath and now he breathed experimentally through his nose to test the air. It was as fresh as it was going to be.

"Shouldn't you wear a mask, sir?" came a whisper from above. Cole was remembering his hygiene lecture. "Stop you catching the same thing off her."

"You can't get cancer that way," Morgan snapped. He stooped to pick up the light, wasted body and passed it up. "Here, take her."

Anne Tresidder was transferred to a slab in the crypt and the two ran quickly out to refill the grave. Cole applied the final touches to make the mound seem natural, then went back to the crypt to start with a ghoul-ish eagerness on his first practical anatomy lesson.

He was a natural surgeon, Morgan realized with a grudging admiration. His methods would never be approved by the Royal College of Surgeons but they were sufficient for the task in hand. His patients would be scarred for life but they would be alive.

Cole sliced through the layers of skin and muscle like a natural, gaily using just the right strength to expose each successive layer – the trapezius, the deltoid, the pectoralis major; merrily delving into the depths of Anne Tresidder's body to reveal the secrets that he had never known existed. He saw the vital organs: the liver and the stomach, nestling side by side below the lungs; behind them, the heart and the kidneys. Morgan told him what they did and where they went, and kept an eye on what he was doing, making sure that he was never so heavy-handed as to kill a live patient from shock. The purpose, he had to remind his verger, was to save lives, not to cut people for the fun of it.

Cole would never be able to handle more than the simplest cases with any guarantee of success, and heaven help any patient with a lump in a major organ, but it would do. Another few lessons and Morgan would have an apprentice as prepared as could be hoped. Someone who would eventually take his place.

"Enough," he said. "Come back to the vicarage."

All who convert to, or become apostates from, a cause have a moment of epiphany. In this case, it had been the discovery that the Director was, after all, fallible. The man had thought that he could fool his benefactors.

The Directorate had always been advanced scientifically, but after it took control the lid was taken off to a select few of the Board and knowledge really started pouring out, a cornucopia for every Sub-Director. For the Sub-Director for Health: a complete map of the human genome; the artificial synthesis of any form of DNA; strict algorithms determining the placement of chromosomes... If all the other Sub-Directors were getting this level of stuff for their own departments, he had reasoned; if this treasure-trove of data was coming in,

then surely, surely the Director would not dare throw it all away again. Surely he would not antagonize his patrons. They had all been there at that meeting of the Board when the Director finally revealed exactly what was happening, and they had all heard the warnings.

But no. The Director was greedy, his former protectors had decided that the Directorate had to be stopped and the Directorate's enemies had been happy to oblige.

Hence the war. And so, he had created the AI. A tiny little searcher, barely distinguishable from the myriad that roamed the Net. It was innocuous enough even to brave the portion of the Net controlled by the enemy.

It took time but after weeks of patient search it came up with the best of all the possible options. W. Morgan, D.D. (Oxon.); a clergyman who took over the parish of Porthperron and who made no further impact on the world. He might have died 30 years later, he might have died the next day. That information had been lost. Dr Morgan was a man of utter historical inconsequence, a man with a minimal impact on time and space. No sign of any marriage, not even a recorded death. An open-ended future. So if a man were to masquerade as Morgan, he could keep his head down, do nothing and never have to worry about conforming to predetermined events. Morgan was one of history's nonentities. Perfect.

He tucked the information away in one corner of his mind and quietly made plans.

Reaction set in, back in the sane surroundings of the vicarage. Cole's hands shook. He was high on adrenaline and fatigue.

"I can't believe it, Dr Morgan," he kept repeating. "I can't believe it. We... we cut her, we —"

Morgan soothed him, placing a large glass of brandy in the man's hands and sitting him down. "There's a book you won't have read, Mr Cole," Morgan said. "*Claudius the God*."

Cole looked blank. "The Emperor Claudius?"

"The same. He asks about his personal surgeon. Where did the man learn his skills? 'From your brother, Caesar,' he is told. 'My brother wasn't a surgeon,' Claudius protests. 'No, Caesar,' he is told, 'your brother was a successful general, who fought many campaigns and left many bodies.' Or words to that effect. The Emperor's own surgeon learnt his trade by cutting up corpses on the battlefield. How else did anyone ever get to learn about surgery? And you did so well!"

"I did, didn't I?" Cole looked down at his glass, then back at Morgan. His mouth twitched into a smile. "It's wonderful, really, isn't it? Like the powers of a god."

"The human body is a wonderful thing, Mr Cole, and it's a privilege to help it." (Listen, Cole, I've looked at the building blocks of life. I've played with them, rearranged them. I could never take human beings seriously again. And now you've got it too.)

"Why are you leaving, Dr Morgan?" Cole asked suddenly. The brandy was giving him a confidence he didn't usually have. "You could stay here and do the operations. The folk would love you, you know."

"What gives you the idea I'm leaving, Mr Cole?" Morgan said quietly.

"Oh, everything! You're always talking as if you won't be here."

"Mr Cole, I'm just urging you to secrecy."

"But why, Dr Morgan? If you know these things you should... you should tell others!"

"I know, but my fame would spread and people would hear of me, and that would be bad. There are other people who want to find me and kill me."

"But why?" Cole persisted. "You're a saint, Dr Morgan. The things you could do. What did you do to these people?"

"I cured their cancer and I did... other things." He bit his lip to shut himself up.

"Other things? What things?"

"I worked for a man who asked me to help him." Morgan found himself seduced by the mixture of brandy and a warm, attentive audience for the first time in years. "Would you believe, people who can breath underwater?" *Virtually undetectable by sonar*. "Or live in a vacuum?" *Ideal for satellite work*. "All that."

"Oh, you're having me on, Dr Morgan." Cole waved his hands about vaguely. "But whatever you did, all those clever things, they must have really loved you! You've come from heaven, Dr Morgan. You're a saint."

"Yes, well, they didn't want to do those things. That was the problem."

"I don't understand you, Dr Morgan. I really don't."

Morgan gave a wan smile. "Do you know how to make God laugh, Mr Cole?"

"Er... can't say I do, Dr Morgan."

"Tell him your plans, Mr Cole. Tell him your plans."

Cole sat absorbing this wisdom in silence, until Morgan yawned. "Two hours to dawn, Mr Cole. We should get some sleep."

"Of course, Dr Morgan."

It was the *way* that they were defeated that hurt so much. He wasn't much involved in the actual strategy so he only picked up rumours, but what rumours!

Captured prisoners who had never heard of the Directorate and were convinced they were fighting someone else...

...who spoke no language known on Earth...

...who had never heard of *other captured prisoners* either...

Then there was the way that the enemy were never where they were supposed to be; or a strike would be launched against a division said to be in such-and-such a place, verified by satellite, but which suddenly *wasn't*; or a whole new army would appear out of nowhere, again usually with only the vaguest idea of who it was fighting.

Every conceivable enemy that the Directorate might have had, it did have. One day, he found out why.

He had thought long and hard about it. He had agonized over every point in his argument.

He liked it in Porthperron. It was good for him. A man with his knowledge and experience could help these honest, unsophisticated people in a thousand small, unimportant ways that all added up. He liked having his self-respect back.

Yet at his back, he always heard... *them*. What could they do with time? He had no idea, but he could imagine. He could picture shock waves from his actions in Porthperron rippling up and down the timelines. He could imagine *them* sensing it and coming for him.

He had to leave. Cole was coming on fine. Morgan had

set him some exercises on a couple of fresh bodies, pretending that there were growths on the lungs, on the stomach, in the neck. The man could cope, just, and should improve with practice.

An unexplained disappearance would be careless. It would cause ripples. People would hear of it and it would certainly find its way into written records. What Morgan planned was far better. A sudden killing, perfectly explicable and entirely unmysterious. And the best of it was, his conscience need not groan under yet another death for no one need actually die.

He steered his cart along one of the twisty, narrow lanes that held this far-flung county together. As far as Porthperron was concerned he was riding into St Austell for a day or two. What little he could plausibly take with him was in the back; mostly clothes, but also a spade and some lamp oil. And, of course, the gold that he had brought with him from the Directorate. Without that he was nothing, in any time.

He came to the right place, about five miles out of the village. He tied the horse up and left the cart by the wayside. The spot he wanted was a short distance from the road. The charred patch where he had burnt his clothes had disappeared, washed away in the rain. The mound was still there, under a gorse bush.

He thought again of Anne Tresidder as he dug the body up. It was only a few feet down. The real Dr Morgan emerged into the daylight again and his replacement began to clothe the body in his own garments. They were an imperfect fit but the oil would make that incidental. Decomposition and the total lack of facial similarity would also become a small matter in the blaze.

He had regretted the killing at the time, but what else could he do? One more death, just one more, and that would be all. No one else need die at his hands, ever again. The device that Carradine and his team had covertly assembled and which had brought doom on the Directorate had worked well; it had dumped him almost at this spot, close to the road that his research showed Morgan would have taken as he arrived in Porthperron. He had waved the man and his horse down...

Anyone finding the anonymous body would have blamed it on robbers, and that part of the plan still held. Poor Dr Morgan, waylaid by highwaymen and burnt in an attempt to get rid of the evidence.

He pulled on his stout walking boots and stood, reaching for the oil. A clap of thunder blew him to the ground again.

Groggily he looked up and shook his head. A dazed figure ten feet away from him was also climbing to his feet. Whoever the man was, he had been through hard times, to judge by the grime on his face and his tattered suit –

“Carradine!” Morgan blurted. The figure blinked at him.

“Hi.” The voice was harsher than he remembered. “Didn’t get very far, did you?” Carradine, once Sub-Director for Science, looked down at the body. “Who’s this poor sod, then? Someone else you ran out on?”

“Carradine, what –”

“Oh, don’t bother.” Carradine sat down and looked immensely tired. “I’ve gone through the stage of wanting to kill you. I’d have done the same in your place.” He shook his head. “The time displacer! Why didn’t I think of that?” He looked almost admiring. “I designed

the thing, didn’t I? The perfect escape. Well, maybe not perfect. They tracked you down and sent me after you.”

“They?”

“The Home Time people, you cretin! They said charges would... oh, hell. Look. Apparently we had already surrendered, that night you ran out. It would only have been a matter of time before we were found. Well, I was found and I was identified. They’d already captured the Institute – you must have been just ahead of them when you got there. The coordinates on the displacer were still set for the 19th century, so they knew someone had used it, and they could guess who. And they sent me after you, because I could identify you. Which I have done. And now, old buddy, we are returning to the ex-Directorate, where *you* will face the music and all charges against me will be dropped.”

Slowly, Carradine drew a gun from out of his jacket. His tone had been jocular but there was no sign of their old friendship in his eyes.

Morgan swallowed but for some reason felt no urge to flee or fight. This seemed strangely right to him. “How do we get back?” he said.

“These coordinates will be swamped with a recall field every 24 hours until we turn up. Since I don’t fancy spending 24 hours in this hole, I suggest you take us somewhere. Where’s the nearest town?”

“Porthperron is 30 minutes in that direction, but I’ve just left –”

“Take us there, then.”

“I said, I’ve just left –”

The gun whirred ominously as Carradine touched the cocking stud. A bullet had fed into the launch chamber and was pointing directly down the barrel at Morgan’s heart.

“I’ll take you,” Morgan said quickly. “Just don’t wave that thing about where it can be seen,” he added.

“I thought you were chief god-botherer here,” Carradine said as they came into the village. Morgan hauled up the cart and frowned. A funeral procession was heading slowly down the main street. There hadn’t been one of those scheduled.

Then his eyes widened in horror. A priest waited at the entrance to St Mary’s; a man who he had last seen lying decomposed, five miles outside Porthperron.

“It can’t be!” he yelled, jumping down from the cart and running towards the column. He caught up with them just as they entered the churchyard. “Cole! Mr Cole! What the hell is this?”

Cole didn’t look at him, didn’t even blink.

“Pentreath! Arthur Pentreath!” His housekeeper’s husband was carrying the coffin and showed the same lack of reaction. The man’s eyes were red and wet, and Morgan felt a suspicion inside him like a lump of lead.

“No, not –”

The procession reached the gate to the graveyard and passed through it. He followed them in and saw the gravestone. Barbara Pentreath, beloved –

“Oh God, no!” he screamed.

“Look,” he heard Carradine say. The man was pointing at the gate. It had been opened for the procession and still stood open, *and shut*. Carradine opened the gate and it merged with the gate that stood open. Carradine shut it and again there were two gates.

Morgan crouched and pulled up a handful of grass. It was there in his hand, and yet still in the ground.

"They can't see us," said a familiar voice in his ear. Carradine had followed him and his face was ashen. "Those... those two-timing bastards! They've diddled with time, they've cut us both off, they've stranded us..."

"Correct," said a voice behind them. "We did warn you."

They turned round. A hawk-faced woman, age indeterminate, stood a few feet away from them. They had seen her before because it had been she that far-off day who told the Board, while the Director sat back with a broad smile on his face and basked in their awe, that her people were sponsoring the Directorate. A woman of the Home Time, the place where all the lines of probability converged, where causality collapsed. That was how she had described it. Her distaste had been clear and she had made no bones about it, yet the probability stream that they were in was apparently notoriously unstable and the Directorate was the best way of keeping it steady. So much easier than removing them from the stream altogether. But there were conditions...

Now a man stood just behind her, weapon raised in both hands, covering them both. Carradine took the hint and put his gun down, slowly.

"Did you forget so easily?" the woman said. She walked forward, hands behind her back. She stopped and looked into Carradine's face. "We told you we could not tolerate your playing with time. Weren't you happy with all the other information we gave you? Weren't you? Why couldn't you leave it alone? Why did you have to meddle?"

She stepped back and looked at both of them. "The Directorate is dead and gone, gentlemen. We twisted and braided and platted the streams, we brought in opposition from other streams and we cut the Directorate off from history. Like a tumour deprived of its blood supply, it withered and died. All that remains is you two."

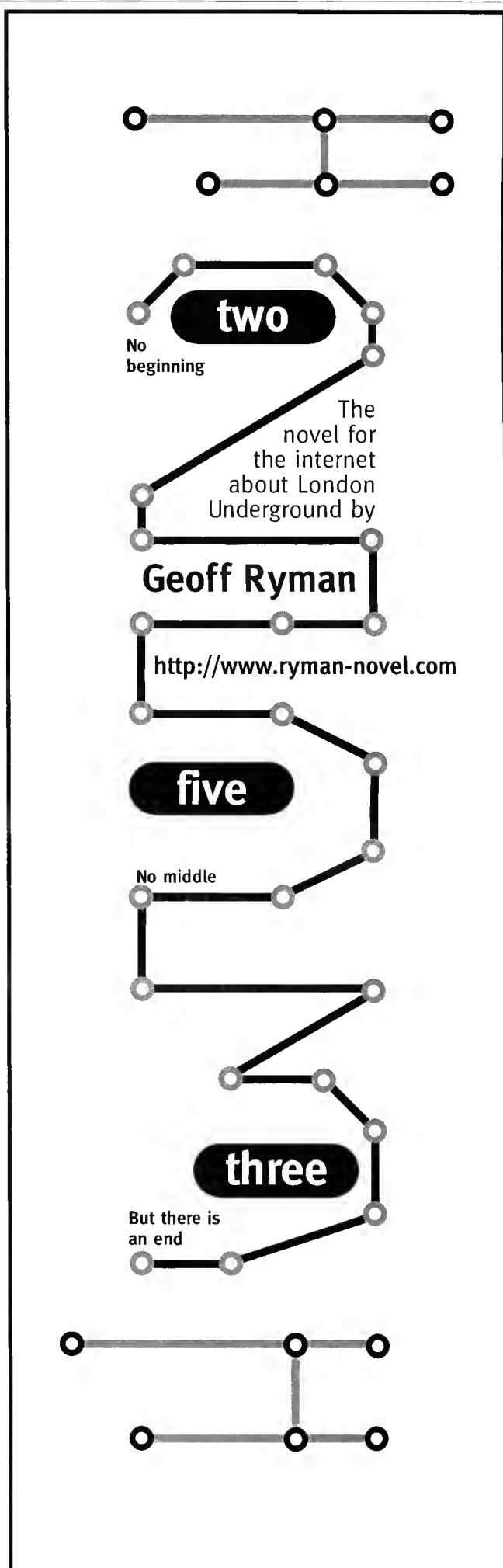
Morgan found his voice. "What happens?" he said.

"There is a large movement in the Home Time pressing for war-crime trials. Carradine disobeyed us but that is not really a war crime. However, what you did with your prisoners..." She looked at him with loathing. "You will both remain here. That is your punishment. You have a probability slightly out of phase with the indigents. You will witness but you will not be able to affect events. Suitable, would you not say?" She tossed them two small plastic containers the size of cigar boxes. "Food synths, so you don't starve. They'll last indefinitely." Then she snapped her fingers and both the Home Timers were gone.

Morgan spun on Carradine. "It's your fault!" he shrieked. "You've done it! You had to be greedy, didn't you? You had to make that time machine. You had to spoil things, you had to, to..." He fell to his knees, weeping. The familiar *click-whirr* of the gun made him look up again.

Carradine stood over him, his eyes hard and the gun raised. Morgan looked at it with a whole new hope.

Ben Jeapes's previous stories in this magazine include "The Data Class" (issue 80), "Giant Killer" (issue 89), "The Robson Strain" (issue 97) and "Cathedral No. 3" (issue 113). He lives in Abingdon, Oxfordshire.



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- #33 Jan/Feb 1990: Brin, Carroll, Newman, Watson, etc.
- #34 Mar/Apr 1990: Calder, Brooke, Griffith, MacLeod, etc.
- #35 May 1990: Baxter, Bayley, Disch, Stableford, etc.
- #36 Jun 1990: Egan, Ings, Newman, Reynolds, etc.
- #37 Jul 1990: Bear, Brooke, Egan, Lee, Stross, etc.
- #38 Aug 1990: special Aldiss issue, Bear, Stableford, etc.
- #39 Sep 1990: Brooke, Garnett, MacLeod, Tuttle, etc.
- #40 Oct 1990: Calder, Gibson/Sterling, Gribbin, etc.
- #41 Nov 1990: Brown, Egan, McAuley, Royle, Webb, etc.
- #42 Dec 1990: all-female issue, Fowler, Murphy, Tuttle
- #43 Jan 1991: Jeapes, Langford, Newman/Byrne, Shaw, etc.
- #44 Feb 1991: Brown, Christopher, Egan, Siddall, etc.
- #45 Mar 1991: Baxter, Holdstock, Landis, Stableford, etc.
- #46 Apr 1991: Beckett, McAuley, Mapes, Moorcock, etc.
- #47 May 1991: special *Aboriginal* issue, Ellison, Pohl, etc.
- #48 Jun 1991: Egan, Griffith, Kilworth, Newman/Byrne, etc.
- #49 Jul 1991: Baxter, Gribbin, Hand, Robinson, Webb, etc.
- #50 Aug 1991: Egan, Griffith, index to first 50 issues, etc.
- #51 Sep 1991: *MILLION* #5 cross-over issue, story by Newman, etc.
- #52 Oct 1991: Baxter, Brown, Gentle, Ian Lee, etc.



- #53 Nov 1991: Evans, Feeley, Landis, MacLeod, etc.
- #54 Dec 1991: Molly Brown's *IZ* debut, Brin, Langford, etc.
- #55 Jan 1992: Baxter, Di Filippo, Egan, Royle, etc.
- #56 Feb 1992: Ballard, Beckett, Redd, Watson, etc.
- #57 Mar 1992: Egan, Goonan, Langford, Lethem, Wilder, etc.
- #58 Apr 1992: 10th anniversary, Ballard, Irwin, Joyce, etc.
- #59: May 1992: Bayley, Brown, McMullen, Newman, etc.
- #60: Jun 1992: special fantasy issue, Kilworth, Landis, etc.

Please note that issues 1-2, 4-13, 15-18 and 20-24 inclusive are now unavailable. Later back-issues (i.e. number 61 onwards) cost £3 each inland; but the 39 issues listed above you may have for just £1.50 each (£2 overseas; \$3 USA). No extra for postage! Please make your cheques or postal orders payable to *Interzone* and send them to 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK.



Also available from the same address at the same price: the 12 remaining issues of *MILLION: The Magazine About Popular Fiction*, Jan 1991-Jun 1993. We still have stocks of all 14 issues except numbers 2 and 5. Just £1.50 each (£2 overseas; \$3 USA).

I've been playing with numerology for another magazine altogether, and can prove conclusively that 1995 – when *Interzone* won its Hugo – was David Pringle's year. Simply tot up the letters of his name according to the ancient and mystical cipher table whereby A=30, B=45, C=60 (and so on), and the total is 1995. With similar irrefutability and an equally mystical cipher (A=211, B=212, C=213...), we see that 1997 is the year of *Fantasy Encyclopedia* co-editor John Grant. Using A=21, B=23, C=25 etc, "Tom Disch" yields his own novel 334; with A=57, B=67, C=77 etc, "Arthur C. Clarke" gives 2001. If I hadn't written software to generate these traditional ciphers at high speed, I'd be almost impressed. Meanwhile, in keeping with the millennial spirit, note that in the still more ancient and mystical cipher A=61, B=62, C=63 etc, the name of *Interzone* itself adds to 666, Number of the Beast. Oh dear.

THE ROAD OF USE AND WANT

Brian Aldiss brags that his lobbying for a Mary Shelley bicentenary postage stamp in 1997 did, to some extent, work. In fact, "the RM will bring out a set of Monsters, including Frankenstein (and Frankenstein's faithful Hound of the Baskervilles). Who will be the artist? The man whose first professional job was to illustrate *Brothers of the Head*, Ian Pollock..." It seems that the 1995 Wells stamps were originally less hideously garish: "The proofs they first sent me were excellent. Then someone in head office decided they should be more pop; the results were pretty atrocious. Of course."

Lionel Fanthorpe has been hosting Channel 4's *Fortean TV*, examining unlikely mysteries – but, in an obvious cover-up, the first episode attempted no investigation of his visible ability to teleport about the set. Just like a certain Alfred Bester character, Charles Fort Jaunte....

Simon R. Green, ever eager to be mentioned, confides the secret of his literary success: "I tend to do things like having someone leave a room twice in a row without having had them come back in again. Or completely forgetting about a sub-plot I'd set up two books earlier, and having to give it its own chapter in the next book. Or there was the time I got halfway through a locked-room murder mystery before discovering that my explanation didn't work. There followed much panic and screaming of oaths as I sought frantically to come up with a new solution that didn't involve jettisoning the already

completed first half..." (Small prize to the first reader who correctly identifies the SRG novel in question.)

Tom Holt is philosophical about his invitation to contribute to the shared-world anthology *Helldivers*, "created by" Janet Berliner of "Professional Media Services" and blatantly taking its inspiration from the tourist theme-park Hell of *Faust Among Equals* by, er, Tom Holt. "I don't mind too much; after all, they've done nothing except swipe my idea, tacitly admit they've swiped my idea, announce that I'm contributing to their confounded anthology and then ask me if I'd fancy contributing. They are, after all, Americans. It's probably something to do with the time difference, or the side-effects of nuclear testing in the Nevada desert. Still, if anybody else bumps into these creeps, a wholesale issue of very long spoons might be in order."

Ursula Le Guin fancies writing a foreword to the collected *Thog's Masterclass*, if our nice publishers accept it: "Her eyes dropped suddenly to the floor, rolling a little, as she gathered up her intestinal fortitude in both hands and murmured, 'Oh, yes, indeed, Sir, I would write your Introduction!'"

Enoch Soames, the literary time-traveller from 1897, is (you will of course remember) scheduled to appear in the British Museum Reading Room at 2:10pm on 3 June 1997.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Blurbismo. The "Usborne Spinechillers" series, we are warned, consists of "Full length spinetling tales – too scary to read in the dark!"

Star-Gazy Pie. Certain British convention organizers danced a jig at the news that Stargazer International Productions was in trouble. Stargazer ran gigantic for-profit sf media events in venues like the NEC or Albert Hall, and – it's said – attacked perceived "competition" from traditional non-profit conventions by denouncing them to the Inland Revenue. Nemesis came in December 1996, when a Wembley Arena *Star Trek* extravaganza (12,000 attendees expected) was cancelled at the last instant. Stargazer went into liquidation, and a vituperative creditors' meeting followed in January. Debts are apparently on the order of £250,000; assets are negligible, apart from a possibly saleable mailing list which somehow escaped the September burglary that destroyed all data files, making Stargazer quite unable to present any financial records at the meeting. The presiding solicitor said aloud that he would have liked more co-

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

operation; "You only had to ask," cried wide-eyed Stargazer boss Simon Jenkins. A glowing account of the company's history was handed out to creditors, and claims that the Wembley event was organized at the request of United International Pictures, to tie in with *First Contact*. Indeed Stargazer had advertised to this effect in *Empire* magazine, which in December printed a denial on behalf of UIP: "The use of UIP's name was completely unauthorized." What larks, what larks.

R.I.P. Brian Burgess and Phil Rogers, long-time sf fans and familiar faces at British conventions, both died in January.

Small Press. Least likely guide to 1997: Frank Key's *Hooting Yard Calendar*, this year's illustration theme being "Planet of the Crumpled Jesuits." Weekdays are given in Croatian, there are useful spaces for (e.g.) LIST OF TROUSERS, and selected days carry reminders like GO ALL RUBBERY. £5 to P. Byrne, Hooting Yard Press, 103 Cavendish Rd, Highams Park, E4 9NG.

Thog's Masterclass. "And the great god laughed with a terrible thin laugh that brought to mind paper cuts and the slicing of eyeballs." (Harlan Ellison, "Chatting with Anubis," 1995)... "Stay where you can be reached. Each of these six words came with that razor clarity, that fiery power, cutting him through, cauterizing the cuts, leaving him afraid to move. If he moved, he'd fall into pieces, into shreds. He had to heal first, had to let his cells regenerate; otherwise he would fall on the floor in strands, like noodles..." "Still, his mouth moved, Keepe surprised that it was possible to move any discrete part of himself without detaching it..." "The words hung in the air like the stench of vomit." (all Sheri S. Tepper, *Gibbon's Decline and Fall*, 1996)

“The word ‘anthropology’ is derived from two Greek words,” wrote Ashley Montagu, “the one *anthropus* meaning ‘man’, and the other *logos* meaning ‘ordered knowledge’. So anthropology is the ordered knowledge of man... divided into two great divisions: (1) cultural anthropology, and (2) physical anthropology” (*Man: His First Million Years*, Mentor edition, 1958, p. 17).

Speculative anthropology has been a science-fictional concern since the earliest days, if only implicitly (e.g. *A Princess of Mars* and the whole *Barsoom* saga). Ditto the related discipline of archaeology. (An archaeologist is an anthropologist who doesn’t like people. Discuss.)

Recent examples of anthropological sf include: *Split Second* (1979) by Garry Kilworth; *No Enemy But Time* (1982) by Michael Bishop; *Always Coming Home* (1985) by Ursula K. Le Guin; *The Falling Woman* (1986) by Pat Murphy. But even these fine writers seem like Johnny (or Jenny)-Come-Latelys when compared to the late Chad Oliver – in my ever so ‘umble opinion.

Chad(wick) Symme Oliver was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on 30th March 1928. Oliver’s education complemented his main literary interests. University of Texas: B.A. (1951); M.A. in English and anthropology (1952). Graduate thesis: “They Built a Tower: The Story of Science Fiction” (perhaps the first of its kind). UCLA: Ph.D., in anthropology (1961). He held several posts as a professional anthropologist, eventually becoming Professor of Anthropology at his first Alma Mater (1980-93).

The twelve-year-old Chad came down with a bad attack of rheumatic fever that left him invalided for months on end. Even after returning to school, he’d “get hit by a germ, drop out again” (from *The Edge of Forever*, p. 18).

“It was while I was semi-sick that I discovered science fiction... I spotted (an Edgar Rice Burroughs) story in a copy of *Amazing* and bought the issue which also contained, as I recall, an ‘Adam Link’ story by Eando Binder and a rousing space epic by Edmond Hamilton. That did it... New worlds had opened to me, and I wanted to be a part of those worlds” (*ibid.*)

Oliver quickly fired off letters/critiques to pulp magazines like *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, *Planet Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Captain Future* and *Super Science Stories*. He often won *Planet’s* best-letter contest, being awarded his

Chad Oliver:

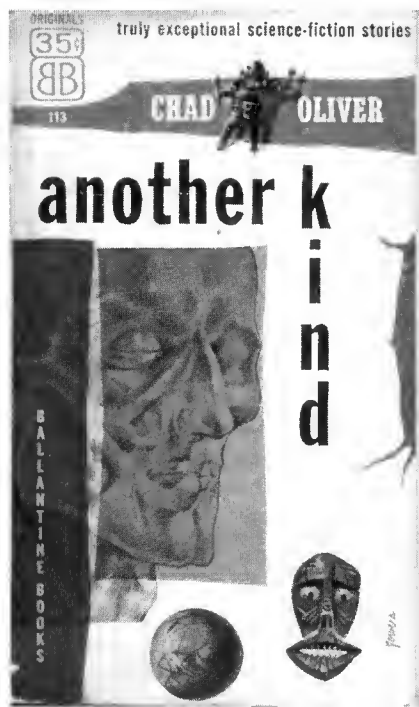
AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Graham Andrews

favourite original interior illustration. “I still have a stack of *Planet* illustrations in an old closet, including many by Finlay, Paul, and Lawrence” (*ibid.*)

In 1945, the Oliver family migrated from Ohio to Crystal City, Texas; pop. 5,000 (approx.) Dr Symmes F. Oliver was the medical officer in charge of an internment camp for Germans and Japanese. The Lone Star state became Chad’s adopted homeland. “I really became a Texan; I just fell in love with the place... the girls, the sun, the country, the rivers where we swam...” (*ibid.*, p. 19).

The Moon Puddle, Vol. I, No. 1, June 1948, was the first and only fanzine produced by Chad Oliver (with fellow Texican Garvin Berry). Oliver’s first – unpaid – published story, “The Imperfect Machine,” appeared in *Texas Literary Quarterly* (Summer 1948). But he soon broke into professional print: “The Land of Lost Content” (*Super Science Stories*, November 1950); “The Blood Star” (ditto, January 1951: collaboration with Garvin Berry); “The Boy Next Door” (*F & SF*, June 1951). In fact, the latter was his first-accepted story.



I fondly remember “Stardust” (*Astounding*, July 1952). It’s a generation-ship story that celebrates humane emotions, not Heinlein-type macho maunderings à la “Universe”/“Common Sense”/ *Orphans of the Sky*. The opening paragraph shows Oliver at his simple-but-effective best:

“Collins floated through the jet blackness that composed the innards of the ship. He moved with every sense alert. He heard the low hum of voices welling

up out of the emptiness ahead of him and the oxygen in the still air tasted sweet to him as he drank it into his lungs. The cold smell of metal was all around him, hemming him in, and he shivered involuntarily in the darkness” (p. 123).

Oliver went on to write several more stories, many of which were snapped up by perceptive anthologists. For example, “Stardust” graced Donald A. Wollheim’s *Adventures in the Far Future* (Ace D-73, 1954).

Mists of Dawn was Oliver’s first novel (see below), followed by the much-more-impressive *Shadows in the Sun* (ditto). Kingsley Amis once slighted *Shadows...*, in his otherwise admirable *New Maps of Hell*: “the hero... is an anthropologist but tough – the ordinary science-fiction hero needs no such apology for his learning” (from Ballantine edition, 1960, p. 123). I disagree, Mr Amis. Anthropologists who work in untitled fields tend not to be 97-pound weaklings. From all accounts, Oliver himself made Dolph Lundgren look like Rick Moranis.

Oliver’s sf output slowed down after the mid-1960s, owing to pressure of – ahem – real work. He never quite made the big time. Out of sight, out of mind? And, perhaps, mainline sf readers prefer the-only-good-alien-is-a-dead-alien power fantasies parlayed by writers who shall remain unnameable. But Oliver never lost the respect of his peers:

“With his specialized knowledge of man’s cultural systems, Oliver is a prime contender for the Heinlein-Clarke front rank of genuine science fiction, in which the science is an accurately absorbing as the fiction is richly human” (Anthony Boucher).

“Chad Oliver is that rare breed, a trained scientist who writes science fiction about his own specialty. He has the kind of gift this field most often lacks – the ability to touch the heart of the human problem” (Damon Knight).

“An Oliver hero does not perform miracles in space; he is no zap-gun-packing rocket jockey who rescues hapless maidens from the clutch of tentacled Martians. The Oliver protagonist is a very real man facing very real problems; the dramatic con-

flicts are genuine, the science is accurate and the ultimate solutions are solidly believable" (William F. Nolan).

The Discovery of Humanity: An Introduction to Anthropology (Harper & Row, 1981) has become a standard college-level textbook in the USA. Other examples of Oliver's non-fiction are "Science Fiction—What It Is and What It Isn't" (*Texas Ranger*, October 1965) and "On Heinlein's Death" (*SFWA Bulletin*, Summer 1988).

Oliver's greatest literary triumph was, arguably, *The Wolf is My Brother* (Signet, 1967), for which he won the Spur Award presented by the Western Writers of America. *Broken Eagle* (Bantam, 1989) is another western novel which movingly details the events that led up to Custer's Last Stand at the Little Big Horn.

Anthologist-gone-mad Roger Elwood commissioned the last really substantial body of sf work by Chad Oliver, for his *Continuum* quartet. Oliver's "Caravans Unlimited" sequence had the same protagonists (Tucker Olton, Alex Parvenir) and basic theme – an intergalactic trading company that is not just the usual Sears-Roebuck-in-space: "Shaka" (1974); "Stability" (1974); "The Middle Man" (1974); "Monitor" (1975). The combined wordage (c. 40,000) would justify book publication, if only as half of a Tor Double.

Mists of Dawn (Winston, 1952)
Juvenile novel, in the "Adventures in Science Fiction" series. Young Mark Nye is hurled by time machine into 50,000 B.C. "Anthropology is a rather large word, but it is nothing to be afraid of" (from Oliver's introduction, *The Science of Man*). William Golding covered much the same ground, in *The Inheritors* (1955).

Shadows in the Sun
(Ballantine, 1954)

Novel. Based on a novella, finally published as "Community Study" (*Lone Star Universe*, edited by Geo. W. Proctor and Steven Utley, 1976). "Paul Ellery knew, with complete certainty, that there was something terribly wrong with the town of Jefferson Springs. He meant to find out what it was" (from 1965 Four Square edition, p. 13). The only flying-saucers-are-real novel you need ever read.

Another Kind (Ballantine, 1955)
Collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked*): "The Mother of Necessity"*, "Rite of Passage"*, "Scientific Method"; "Night"*; "Transformer"*, "Artifact"; "A Star Above It".

The Winds of Time (Doubleday, 1957)
Novel. The aliens had "... slept for 15,000 years. But they were men. Nevertheless it was a fantastic experience for Wes Chase to discover them while on a casual fishing trip" (from blurb to 1959 Pocket Books edition).

Oliver's most free-and-easy (adult) novel. Reminiscent of *The Time Masters* (1953; revised 1971) by Wilson Tucker – but far less paranoid in tone.

Unearthly Neighbors
(Ballantine, 1960)

Novel. Revised edition: Crown, 1984. Monte Stewart & Co. try to communicate with the inexplicably violent Merdosi, on a Sirian planet. "Other science-fiction writers have invented more 'alien' aliens than these for us to make contact with. Few, though, have been as able as Oliver to convince us that this is the way that first contact is going to be" (Frederik Pohl). Author's preferred title: *Shoulder the Sky*.

The Shores of Another Sea
(Signet, 1971)

Novel. Apt epigraph: "If... you make a landfall on the shores of another sea in a far country inhabited by savages... remember you this; the greatest danger and the surest hope lies not with fires and arrows but in the quicksilver hearts of men" (*Advice to Navigators*, 1744). How to run a baboonery in Kenya – while dealing fairly with alien interlopers. Doubleplusgood.

The Edge of Forever
(Sherbourne Press, 1971)

Collection. Contents (every story outstanding): "The Worlds of Chad Oliver: A Biographical Introduction" by William F. Nolan; "Transfusion"; "A Friend to Man" (formerly "Let Me Live in a House"); "Field Expedient"; "The Ant and the Eye"; "First to the Stars" (formerly "Stardust"); "Didn't He Ramble." Plus "Afterthoughts" by Chad Oliver; "Chad Oliver's Collected Science Fiction: A Basic Checklist" by William F. Nolan.

Giants in the Dust (Pyramid, 1976)
Novel. "Was (Charles Varnum) a man

of tomorrow – or a man of yesterday? The scion of a dying race – or the forerunner of superman? A Father, a Son, or a spirit out of time?" (blurb). You might well ask. Hacked about more-than-somewhat by the Pyramid people, to Oliver's understandable chagrin.

Chad Oliver died on August 9th 1993, finally losing a game struggle against cancer. Surgery, chemotherapy, radiology and convalescence had taken up too much of his last eight years. But he never forsook writing and fishing (not necessarily in that order). Oliver was survived by his wife, Betty Jane ("Beje"), whom he married in 1952, and two children: Kimberly Francis (b. 1956); Glen Chadwick (b. 1968).

Stylistically, Oliver was a doing-words writer. But he could rise to the poetical occasion, especially when describing rural vistas (à la Clifford D. Simak). William F. Nolan put it well:

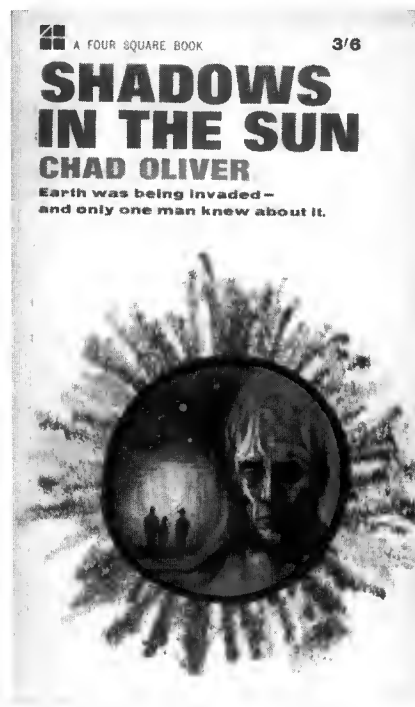
"(Oliver's) loyalty to Texas, his adopted state, ran high... his descriptions of the country verged on the rhapsodic... yet Chad's emotion for this land was genuine. Ohio had given him birth and early boyhood, but Texas had claimed him as a man... his interest in Indian lore helped widen the scope of his writing" (from *The Edge of Time*, pp. 25-6).

The two above-mentioned collections represent just a fraction of Oliver's short-fiction oeuvre. Nor was he limited to anthropology for subject matter – or should that be xen-anthropology? For example, "Transformer" (*F & SF*, November 1954) combines "It's a Good Life" with *The Borrowers*. Narrative hook: "Our town is turned off now, all gray and lazy, so this seems like a good time to begin" (*Another Kind*, p. 92).

Fine as-yet-uncollected Chad Oliver stories include: "Technical Advisor" (*F & SF*, February 1953); "Life Game" (*Thrilling Wonder Stories*, June 1953); "1, Claude" (*F & SF*, February 1956), with Charles Beaumont; "A Stick for Harry Eddington" (*F & SF*, August 1965); "King of the Hill" (*Again, Dangerous Visions*, 1972, edited by Harlan Ellison); "Meanwhile, Back at the Morgue" (*Analog*, April 1981); "To Whom It May Concern" (*A Spade of Spacetime*, 1981, edited by Fred Saberhagen).

Some nice publisher should bring out a Chad Oliver retro-tome – immediately, if not sooner. Along with *Shadows in the Sun*, *Unearthly Neighbors* / *Shoulder the Sky*, and a restored text of *Giants in the Dust*. Bantam were scheduled to publish his last novel, *The Cannibal Owl* (about the founding of Austin, Texas), in 1994. Not yet seen... as we say. Hal W. Hal's *The Work of Chad Oliver: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide* (Borgo Press, San Bernardino, California, 1989) is an invaluable volume that needs minimal updating.

Graham Andrews





Aliens have become something of an embarrassment to written sf. They have been hijacked and codified by TV series and bestselling confessions, their limitless potential reduced to big-eyed, big-headed, grey-skinned puppet figures intent on kidnap and pseudo-sexual or pseudo-medical violations. That's when they're not betentacled/skull-faced/cyborged monstrous hordes bent on reducing the world to smoking rubble, or humanoids with funny foreheads serving under human command in antiseptic vehicles which spread American culture across the galaxy.

The sf concept – and it is at the core of 20th-century sf – of aliens as signifiers of the other, creatures with radically different patterns of culture evolved in environments distant and distinct from those of the Earth, has been overshadowed by these clichés. Panels about aliens at sf conventions invariably degenerate into pointless debates over whether *Star Trek* or *Babylon 5* is best at portraying aliens. Here are two good novels which attempt to redress the balance and reclaim the alien as autonomous creatures and not plot devices.

Gwyneth Jones's Aleutian trilogy, which includes *North Wind*, *White Queen* and the novel under consideration, *Phoenix Café* (Gollancz, £16.99), describes mostly from the inside the long flowering and decay of an invasion by aliens who came to Earth to trade but, like the British in China or India, found more responsibility than they had bargained for. The Aleutian Expedition conquered most of Earth (but not the USA, which broods inside a self-imposed quarantine) more or

Sexing the Alien

Paul McAuley

less by accident, precipitating a Gender War between men and women when mistaking a feminist congress for the Earth's government, and then clumsily trying to patch the ecological and social damage caused by human (that is, male) technology. As I noted in my review of *White Queen*, the Aleutians, sexually ambiguous, communicating mostly by body-language and release of hormones and living cells, thus blurring the distinction between world and self, are amongst the most sympathetically and richly imagined aliens in recent sf.

In *Phoenix Café*, that alienness has infected most of the world, and Aleutian rule is sinking into decadence. Most humans live in desperate poverty in hives, encouraged by cults to commit suicide in the hope of rebirth into a better life (the Aleutians have gen-

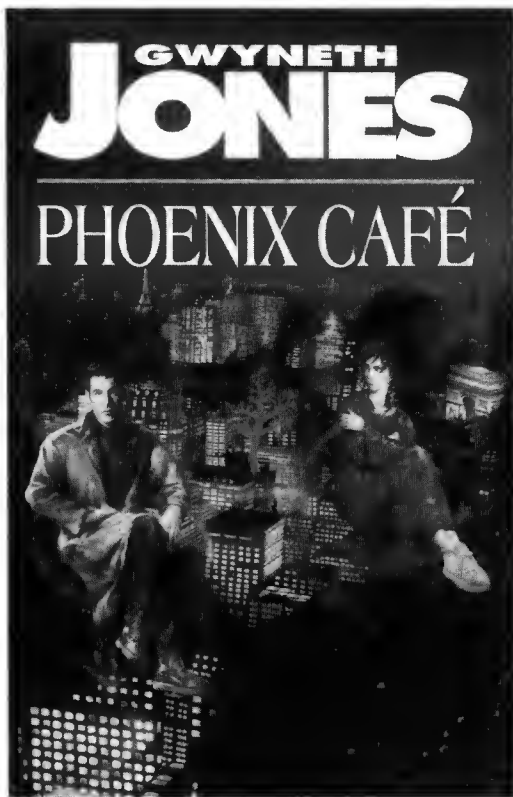
uine reincarnation, which braids together the 300-year span of the three novels). A few humans, directly serving the Aleutians, have grown rich. But now the Aleutians have decided to depart, returning to their home world using a kind of existential teleportation. It was invented by an eccentric human genius just before the invasion, and used in *North Wind* by human saboteurs in an attempt to infiltrate the Aleutian shipworld, lost and found again (the search was the motor of *White Queen*) and now has been modified by the Aleutians to transport their shipworld home.

One of the original captains of the expedition, Clavel, has been reborn in an adopted human girl (or possibly an Aleutian reshaped into human likeness), Catherine, who has a changeling's child-like innocent curiosity. She falls in with Misha, the son of the warden of one of Earth's last wildernesses and his gang of young renaissance idealists, who meet and play virtual reality games in the Phoenix Café.

The plot involves a conspiracy by the human elite to steal and use the Aleutian superweapon, and resurgence of hitherto suppressed rivalries between Reformers (female) and Traditionalists (male). Like the plots of all Jones's adult novels it is complex, organic, patched with qualifications, and obscured by a refusal on Jones's part to explain anything directly. Not only that, but it is mostly smoke and mirrors, a burlesque of the juvenile conspiracy plots which are all too common in sf. But it moves through a world that is richly textured and informed by the acute intelligence of Jones's gaze upon the matter of the real world, and in particular upon the polarities of human sexuality and the nature of reality.

For the Aleutians, intercourse is for exchanging information, not gametes. Human sex seems to them to be a kind of autism, in which higher mental functions are suppressed by carnal appetites. In *North Wind*, a journalist was raped by Clavel, who wanted to learn of Earth; in revenge, the journalist tried to destroy the Aleutians' worldship. That event shaped Aleutian and human relationships. Here, Clavel's avatar, Catherine, accepts rape by Misha as a kind of atonement, and a hard lesson in her own hitherto suppressed human sexuality. It transfigures both of them and in the end it is not clear who is using whom (at least, sexually). The boundaries Jones explores are not only between human and alien, but between male and female, self and world. The aliens vanish. In the mirror is our own selves.

Phoenix Café is wise and witty and rewarding, a fine conclusion to an extraordinary hard-sf trilogy. Read it.



There is the world, and there is the word. The problem with Ian McDonald, who has a fine, alert, jackdaw's eye, is that he makes no distinction when he borrows from the world and texts about the world to furnish his richly imagined fictions. But of course words are not the world. We all have the world in common, but texts are special cases filtered from the commonality by particular conscious acts. The reader who encounters in one fiction the unsmoothed edges of some nugget directly borrowed from another work is brought up short, and the shock of recognition jars the suspension of disbelief that allows us to believe that a particular set of words (McDonald's) are the world.

Sacrifice of Fools (Gollancz, £16.99) is a near-future thriller in which a technologically advanced alien culture, the Shian, has scattered eight million of its people in little communities across the face of the Earth. The scenario closely echoes that of the movie *Alien Nation*, in which a million aliens are dumped in the multicultural stew of Los Angeles; McDonald's aliens aren't ex-slaves, but they do share an aversion to water. The sexuality of the Shian, which is the crux of the novel's mystery, is such that they come into heat only twice a year but are otherwise ambiguously asexual, echoing Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (although McDonald's aliens are not hermaphrodite); the Shian's use of chemicals to enhance language echoes Gwyneth Jones's asexual Aleutians. And humans who want to fuck these exquisite asexual creatures hang out in cross-dressing bars and are known as *frooks*; we remember Samuel R. Delany's short story "Aye, and Gomorrah..." in which *frelks* hung out in cross-dressing bars hoping to fuck exquisite asexual space-pilots.

In the finely realized near future of *Sacrifice of Fools* no one has heard of the texts or movies which the aliens who have invaded their world so closely echo (although someone does refer to "... the alien nation of Short Strand"). But the reader has. Sf has a long tradition of reworking and embroidery of ideas, but because McDonald's borrowings are only lightly reworked (which may be the point, given his mixmaster philosophy of fiction generation), recognition causes the reader to be jarred from the flow of his well-crafted and otherwise absorbing novel.

It's the near future. It's Northern Ireland, now under joint sovereignty of London and Dublin. It has its share of the eight million Shian, adding to tensions between Protestants and Catholics. Andy Gillespie, one-time driver for a Loyalist hit squad, became fluent in the alien language while in the Maze prison, and is haunted by guilt over the circumstances by which he acquired his fluency. He is working

with a Shian family in a Transient's House, giving aid to Shian adolescents on their *wanderjahrs*. The family are killed and sexually mutilated; Andy Gillespie is the prime suspect, and sets out to find the truth. And what he finds, in uneasy alliance with a Shian *genro*, or knight advocate, is that he understands the aliens less than he thought.

Gillespie is a sympathetic and well-drawn protagonist, caught between human culture and an intriguing and fully realized alien society. His travels through the underside of Northern Ireland's sectarian politics are convincingly detailed, and both the mundane world and the alien culture of Shian are fully realized in vital and precise prose (particularly a chillingly wonderful depiction of a kind of cathedral which induces a paralysing *agape* in defenceless humans). While the sexuality of the Shian may not be particularly original, McDonald pursues its consequences with a closely argued and thrilling rigour. Amongst the Shian, sex is not polarized into aggressive/submissive roles and war is unknown; they hold up a distorting mirror to human society and male sexuality (although not female sexuality, despite a significant part of the novel being given to a young woman detective sergeant with marriage problems). The resolution of the murder mystery revolves around an understanding of Shian culture, but McDonald is scrupulously fair, and does not withhold from the reader the knowledge needed to work out the motivation of the killer. *Sacrifice of Fools* is fast-moving, passionate, and technically accomplished, and one of McDonald's best.

Ben Bova's *Moonrise* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99) is dressed up as a hard-sf account of the colonization of the Moon early in the next century, but it's really a pot-boiling family saga, more *Dallas* or *Dynasty* than *Earthlight* or *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Here's some of the plot. Paul Stavenger is fleeing on foot across the Moon's surface from a disaster in which deadly nanotechnology was released. Interleaved with his efforts to survive the Moon's magnificent desolation (which Bova conveys rather well) is a back-story of implausible family and corporate scheming. As in most American hard sf, the government can't be trusted with anything as important as space exploration; it's up to go-ahead entrepreneurs. Masterson Aerospace has established a permanent moon station, but wants to close it to save money. Ex-astronaut Stavenger is its enthusiastic advocate. He is also the lover of Joanna, wife of the president and Chief Executive Officer of the corporation. When Joanna's husband dies, seemingly by his own hand, she schemes to have Stavenger promoted

to CEO over Gregory Masterson III, her eldest son.

Greg III is crazy, loves his mother more than he should, has already killed his father and others, and is responsible for letting loose the deadly nanotechnology. After 300 pages of back-and-forth narration, Stavenger dies, and the story jumps forward 18 years to a confrontation at the moonbase between crazy Greg and Stavenger and Joanna's son, a *wunderkind* eager to prove himself the equal of his dead father.

And so on. Once Stavenger is killed off, Bova mostly gives up on trying to tell a scientifically lucid story. Big projects are concocted on the spur of the moment and acted upon immediately; Greg III, alternately enthusiastic about Moonbase and desperate to destroy it, is not even consistently crazy; Joanna is alternately a hard-bitten corporate schemer and a helpless handwinger. One gets the feeling that Bova made *Moonrise* up as he went along, and stopped once he had reached the contracted number of words. It is the first volume of the *Moonbase Saga*. You have been warned. However contrived, *Moonrise* does at least have a plot.

In *The Unicorn Sonata* (Headline, £9.99), Peter S. Beagle dispenses with the middle of the problem-conflict-resolution formula to present a feel-good story in which there's no chance of anything horrid happening. Teenage Josephine Rivera is working in the music shop of nice Mr Papas when a boy wanders in and tries to sell a unique horn. She follows him and discovers herself in a magical realm. In a clever reversal of the little-magic-shop format, it is the customer who is magic: a unicorn, in fact, a rebel (but not, it turns out, too much a rebel) member of the herd of tutelary unicorns who govern the magic realm, and the only one not made blind by a mysterious sickness. Fortunately, Josephine's grandmother remembers a cure from the old country, Josephine learns how to scribe the song which sings the magical realm into being, and all is well. It's a young-adult novella padded out to book length by large type and pastel illustrations, nicely written but as sweet and calory-free, and about as good for you, as aspartame.

Jack Williamson has been an sf writer for almost seven decades. His first stories were published in the pulp pages of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* and *Science Wonder Stories*, and despite some scene-setting longueurs at the beginning, his latest novel, *The Black Sun* (Tor, \$23.95) echoes the freshness and rough vigour of those more innocent and optimistic times.

It is the near future. Project Starseed has sent out 98 starships using

faster-than-light quantum-wave technology. The catch is that the ships cannot return, and their crews cannot determine where they will emerge, except that it will be close to an object with a deep enough gravity well to collapse their wave function – in other words, around a star. The 99th and last ship hastily departs ahead of a scandal concerning its crooked financier. It emerges around a dead star, the black star of the title, close to a planet whose atmosphere has long ago frozen solid.

The starship lands. Strange lights are seen in the ice. Alien ruins are uncovered. There's a mutiny against the captain, a last-minute substitution and an ally of the crooked financier, and the ex-convict who tried unsuccessfully to plant a bomb on the financier's behalf. Two children and two adults, under the influence of alien memory-beads, set out towards the polar mountains; they are pursued by the children's mother and a star-struck Mexican stowaway. Wonders unfold. Once past some slow and overly

complicated scenes on Earth, *The Black Sun* moves itself along, and the reader with it, at a brisk pace only occasionally slowed by the treacle of sentiment. The mystery of the vanished alien civilization is genuine, the science is convincing, and Williamson makes a good fist of conveying the long, ancient history of the frozen world. Nearly 70 years after he published his first story, he remains at the heart of sf.

Paul J. McAuley

The cover of Ellen Datlow's anthology, *Lethal Kisses* (Orion, £16.99 hc; £9.99 pb) suggests its "19 stories of sex, horror and revenge" may well run to the tacky; on the other hand, it promises Ruth Rendell and Joyce Carol Oates for starters and the shop will give you a plain bag; be not deterred.

In fact there's a lot more about bad sexual relationships than bad sex and not all stories keep to the brief, though Terry Lamsley's "Back in the Dunes" is a straightforward vengeful ghost tale about the comeuppance of an irresponsible philanderer, Michael Marshall Smith's "Foreign Bodies" is a highly unconventional treatment of the same idea, and both are very well done – as is just about everything in the book. I have my own favourites, including Douglas Clegg's "O, Rare and Most Exquisite," a bravura variation on the theme of serial betrayal, but they're based on highly subjective criteria.

Among the best are Christopher Fowler's "Unforgotten" (an update of "The Cask of Amontillado") which contains no sex and only a very indirect sort of revenge, while J. C. Oates's "Leave Me Alone God Damn You" concerns a masochist who is the victim of her own sexual revenge. Something similar could be said of Michael Swanwick and Jack Dann's "Ships," a gorgeously-written allegory of nothing very much, while the "revenge" taken in Pat Murphy's quietly witty "A Flock of Lawn Flamingoes" is so mild that it barely qualifies. The sex/revenge aspect of Ruth Rendell's "The Dreadful Day of Judgement" is a minor ornament to the main theme, an exploration of straight male relationships, while the same goes for David J. Schow's beautifully constructed "A Punch in the Doughnut," where the principal man is gay.

A few stories, including Richard Christian Matheson's "The Screaming Man" and Michael Cadnum's "Touch Me Everyplace" are a bit inconsequential for such company; A. R. Morlan's "... Warmer," Pat Cadigan's "A Lie for a Lie" and Caitlín R. Kiernan's "Anamorphosis" strive too obviously for effect; and Roberta Lannes's "Butcher's Logic" is too earnest for my taste, but this is one of those rare collections without a

Sex, Horror – and SF

Chris Gilmore

single turkey.

Warmly commended; why not buy the paperback and have it tastefully bound in the skin of an enemy?

It was a long-running grievance of Isaac Asimov's that because he wrote sf people expected him to believe in UFOs. Any who still make that sort of assumption will feel at home with Jack McDevitt's *Ancient Shores* (Voyager, £5.99) which is a curiously old-fashioned tale of how someone digs up an extraterrestrial artefact left behind at least ten millennia back, but still good as new.

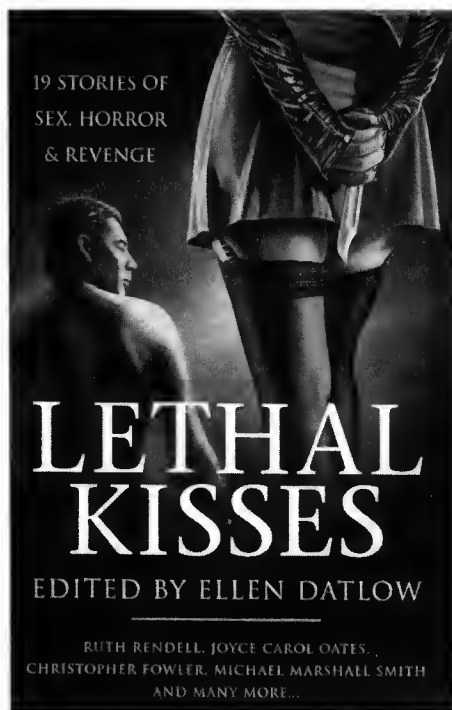
The item in question is a pleasure

yacht which seems to have plied Lake Agassiz (a North American inland sea) in Pleistocene times, but sports hull and sails of element No 161, no less. (I'd have expected that to be a very heavy metal, but who can truly say?) So what to do with such a find? Try to keep it under wraps till you're sure you've good title, then sell at auction. A patriotic type might think of giving the government first refusal, but some people are never satisfied; where there's a boat there may well be a boathouse, discernible to radar.

And so it proves. Golly. The story reads like a very weak imitation of both *Rogue Moon* and *Quatermass and the Pit*, the principal defects being McDevitt's stolidly pedestrian style and matching preoccupations. He has a good eye for detail but no discrimination, so that much of the writing concerns mundane actions which do nothing to develop the characters or advance the plot. He also fails to visualize the interest such a find would surely arouse. Neither the American government, NATO, the United Nations nor any of their agencies shows any inclination to involve itself – the closest approach is from an academic archaeologist, incensed at not being asked to nominate a sound professional to superintend the dig. Instead it's left to Tom Lasker, the farmer who turned up the original boat, his friend Max Collingwood, a restorer of vintage aircraft, and the Sioux Nation, under whose land the "boathouse" is buried.

Next the boathouse turns out to be a gate to another, beautiful world; we've moved from Budrys and Kneale into Clarke territory (with a touch of endemic mysticism which never comes to anything), but the protagonists remain myopically concerned with maximizing net present value, while the rest of America and the world wonder if all this new technology might not depress the blue-collar job market. The outcome is a mad scramble for part of the action, but only by the little people; the big boys are all for blowing it up and pretending it never happened.

Granted that timidity, folly and greed are major aspects of the human condition, I proclaim my faith



in human nature: when the chips are down greed will triumph over timidity every time. McDevitt evidently believes the opposite, and your enjoyment of his suspense-writing depends crucially on your either sharing that belief or being able to suspend your own. It isn't good enough for me, especially when, by way of sustaining momentum, McDevitt wastes an important character to a seriously dumb accident and introduces a stuffed shirt – Oops! sorry, sage – one Walter Asquith, who says things like this:

...we also need someone whose sole function will be to consider the *meaning* of what is happening here, to apply these events against the progress of the human spirit. I think that I am uniquely qualified for such a role...

Asquith knows what everyone else ought to do in the fashion of very late Heinlein, and such is his mastery of publicity that in the end the friends claim victory and everyone else is to too overawed to disagree. I should mention that McDevitt has enlisted the services of certain well-known intellectual personalities, some of whom I admire (one is already dead), as spear-carriers in his closing chapters; perhaps cynically, I wonder how many read the whole of his MS.

Vampires are creatures of fantasy, so that although a writer can pick-'n'-mix among their traditional attributes the hard sf approach is at a disadvantage. Dan Simmons tried it in *Children of the Night*, but without great conviction; now Jonathan Nasaw has combined hard sf with soft porn in *The World on Blood* (NEL, £5.99). His vampires are really only a new kind of junkie; they enhance their senses and amplify their jollies with modest amounts of human blood, but don't need it to survive. That makes his choice of locale (the West Coast) especially appropriate, since as junkies they have automatically spawned their own addict-support group (VA). The combination of smug schmooze and gruesome false bonhomie at VA meetings contributes some of the best scenes in the book, but the major focus is on three characters: Nick, a gay IT expert, is confiding to a computer (more for his own benefit than for any future readership) the story of his graduation from the bath-house scene to the vampire/witchcraft scene; Whistler, a cynical, middle-aged vampire, amuses himself by kidding the rest of VA that he's kicking the habit while indulging it mightily and enjoying a graphically described debauch with the third: Lourdes, a young, pretty, desperately ill-educated new vampire.

That aspect of the book shares the fundamental weakness of all porn: in so far as the activities described are such as one might enjoy, they're dull

– “druther do it than read it” – or slightly ridiculous; in so far as they aren't, they're gross. Much more interesting is Whistler's complicated plot to avenge, with the connivance of a tame witch, the boredom inflicted upon him: he intends to smash VA with a betrayal for which Nick will be the only plausible scapegoat. Such a project allows Nasaw plenty of scope for bad-taste wisecracks, some of them rather good, but its essential triviality is matched only by that of the characters; my emotional involvement stuck at zero – even when Whistler and Nick both became fathers, Whistler by Lourdes, Nick by the dim priestess of a religion that permits belief in anything or nothing.

Since Nick is as gay as ever that must be done by artificial insemination – yes, he can shut his eyes and think of bum, but only when he's on blood, which he has kicked. Nick's hothouse conscience is almost as irritating as Whistler's earnest materialism and mannered hedonism, while January, a minor character who comes to the fore in the latter part of the book, is little better; a vampire waif with too many chips for her narrow shoulders, she idiot-plots a slight story well beyond its natural length.

Nasaw writes well most of the time, but to get all the references you will need to be strong on the West Coast scene; I've no way of knowing how many passed me by completely. If he can find a worthwhile subject, a less parochial ambience and some characters worthy of empathy, he may produce something better, but meanwhile... to lift a flat stone and observe the dwellers thereunder fills three of four idle minutes well enough, but this is a book of 360 pages.

The “novel of process,” which describes how a project is conceived, set in train and (usually) completed has a long tradition in hard sf; even older is the “prophetic” novel, in which the events of the next few decades are described in what strives to be plausible but invariably proves to be wildly inaccurate detail. James L. Halperin's *The Truth Machine* (Del Rey, \$24) exemplifies both, and takes for its theme the ways in which advances in computer technology will transform society for the better. The book itself is described as having been produced by a computer in 2050, which fully explains its flat but turgid style of reportage but does nothing to excuse its overarching defect – an unctuous deference towards its own characters far surpassing E. Stobes on the entourage of Lord Gnome.

Pete Armstrong, the protagonist, is a software genius (no nerd he!) and a lightning calculator with an eidetic memory who gathers together a team of almost equal brilliance with the long-term object of creating an infallible lie-detector; an ambitious under-

taking, so to generate cashflow (and give themselves warm feelings) he and his team set about revolutionizing healthcare, traffic-control, crime-detection, lottery-number selection strategies (I swear I'm not making this up) and anything else we mere mortals may have got not quite right.

Their strategy is simplicity itself: “creating an essentially flawless, self-improving system and offering it risk-free.” What marketing man could resist that? None (probably) but just in case, they deliver speeches about what a wizard idea that (among others) is. Nor do they waste time in their social interactions, for such of their dialogue which isn't sentimental, phatic utterance is speeches in larval form. Those not currently sounding off listen with appropriately silent rapture; their turn will come. *Ralph 124C41+* is born again.

As the 21st century progresses it develops into Halperin's notion of Utopia – a world where everyone bugs himself with Nixonian fervour, and files the data for retrieval should he later be called to account by any of the proliferating agencies which have interrogation rights. Yet all is not well in Paradise; as weapons of mass destruction become ever cheaper and more efficient, Halperin foresees the day when it will be in the power of any prematurely released psychopath to destroy the world – just as one such killed Pete's beloved baby brother. How to save humanity? By the Truth Machine, if it can only be got on-line fast enough. Pull 'em in, ask if they feel like a spot of genocide, if the red light shows when they say no, don't turn 'em loose till they've got over it.

Oh yes. Halperin realizes that one or two people may have less sinister secrets or ambitions which they might not want picked over by every agent of the nanny state. One such, Charles Scoggins (and there's a name to go to bed with), infiltrates Pete's organization and offers Pete a faustian bargain – using, of course, Pete's inherent benevolence to entrap him in a Web of Deceit. The bait offered must represent a new low in plausibility, as does Pete's method of destroying the evidence once he has, in his righteous wrath, murdered Scoggins – well, he was the kind of guy who watches SM videos; who needs *them*?

And it's all like that. This is a novel stuffed with ideas, but they're all weak, second-hand or both. As a crowning insult to the entire field, he lifts a story from *The Mote in God's Eye*, but mangles it so badly that Niven & Pournelle will never sue – they'd be ashamed to acknowledge their off-spring in such maimed condition. There are certain adjectives for which one never seems to need a superlative form, but I must now make my spell-checker aware of “jejunest.”

Chris Gilmore



**FREE TO
THOSE WITH
AMBITION**

253 more reasons to be cheerful

Paul Brazier

He opened the
bathroom door
and instantly
became
rigid all over



On 20th January 1997, Geoff Ryman brought a little light and warmth to a cold damp Monday evening in Regents Street in London. In a converted swimming pool in the University of Westminster, and in front of a small invited audience, Ryman introduced his newest creative work – *two five three: a novel for the Internet about London Underground in seven cars and a crash* – with wine, nibbles, two Macintosh computers running versions of the novel, and, as centrepiece to the evening, a dramatized reading of excerpts.

The novel itself is freely available on the internet to anyone with a net connection and the time and patience to sit and read it. It is an interactive hypertext novel, which means it can't simply be downloaded and printed out – the reader has to read it online. Briefly, the novel is a snapshot of all the passengers on a London underground train on the Bakerloo Line, early evening on 17th January 1995. The reader is presented with a seating

Centre: Passenger 96: Geoff Ryman, "An amateur actor on holiday from his day job."

Below: The Deep End is a converted swimming pool. Ryman begins his performance.

The other pictures on this page are taken from the adverts in *two five three*.



plan of the train. Clicking on any seat will bring up the character sketch of the person sitting there; this is an interactive hyperlink. There are other such hyperlinks embedded in the text. If the character is thinking about one of the other passengers, there is a link to that other passenger; there are also footnotes, advertisements and commentaries on such luminaries as Mick Jagger and Margaret Thatcher.

As is usual with Ryman's work, the observation is acute and the characterization is deft, pithy, and occasionally achingly funny. His performance of his own work is unstintingly lampooned in one of the characters, Geoff

Ryman, an amateur actor who is taking part in an action play on the underground. But Ryman is in fact a very talented performer. Given the fragmentary nature of the novel, and the fact that he was suffering from the 'flu, he made the whole evening flow exceptionally easily, producing laughter, sadness, sympathy, and finally giving a wonderfully moving reading of the closing passage of the novel. Of the nature of the novel, he says it is extraordinarily

difficult writing like this, because there is no flow. He also realizes that what he has actually created is a work that in some ways does no more than an attentive reader would do with an ordinary novel: such a reader makes connections between disparate parts of the story, and bears them in mind when considering new parts of the narrative. Certainly, reading the novel on the net is not nearly as interesting an experience as hearing Ryman read it. However, there is a much bigger audience for the internet version. I must say that

staring at a screen for long periods is not my dream of the perfect novel-reading experience, so we are lucky that it is Ryman who has attempted this difficult feat first; for the rewards are undoubtedly there, in that *rara avis* nowadays, a new and eagerly awaited novel from Geoff Ryman.

two five three is at <http://www.ryman-novel.com>. For those without an internet connection, Geoff assures me that the paper re-mix will be available from HarperCollins early in 1998. But it won't be the same: visit the web site.

Paul Brazier



Taking C. S. Forester's *Hornblower* as template for an sf series is hardly original; he was even, reportedly, the inspiration for *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk. But over in the US, two authors – Davids Feintuch and Weber – have launched a sub-genre of nautically-derived sf, with rival series, protagonists, and space-going futures shrink-wrapped around a seafaring-era chassis to replicate *Hornblower's* milieu as closely as possible in tone, if not in technology.

In David Feintuch's four-volume *Seafort Saga*, humanity has made a recovery of sorts after a very rough period and is now united under an authoritarian if relatively benevolent government and has a series of extra-solar colonies that can only be reached by voyages of several months, even years. Aboard a Fused starship, isolated for long periods from the rest of humanity, the Captain is an all-powerful figure and naval discipline is absolute – for example, touching the Captain even accidentally invites the death penalty. Officers and ordinary seamen are drawn from totally different classes; corporal punishment and “hazing” are both features of a Navy supposedly built directly on the British Navy; though there are AI-computers the Navy puts more trust in its human officers; Christianity is the state religion and its morality rules society. All this is not that convincing: although the Captain Bligh style must have seemed like the only way to run ships or states back in Nelson's day, starships will surely require a more sensible way of doing things. To be fair to Feintuch though, Seafort makes his share of seriously dim decisions, and wins out as much by luck as by judgment.

David Weber, by contrast, in his “Honor Harrington” series, posits a multitude of diverse stellar states loosely linked by trade, with much shorter voyage times than in Feintuch's universe. Rivalry has finally led to war – and, of course, stellar-naval action – between the plucky monarchy of Manticore, and the bigger, stronger and nastier people's dictatorship Republic of Haven. While Feintuch's future-history is at least a determined attempt at justifying his *Hornblower* world, Weber's is nothing more than a string of mildly exotic planet-names with simplistic political labels attached to them guaran-

Hopes for the future; or, Sci-fi Yo Ho Ho

Neil Jones

teed to satisfy only the totally uncritical – good-guy Manticore is the sort of rosy-tinted take on the royalist (and of course British) state that may play well enough on the opposite side of the Atlantic but seem absurd over here, while bad-guy Haven is just a cheap caricature of the Soviet Union.

Feintuch's series protagonist is Nicholas Seafort, and we first encounter him in *Midshipman's Hope* (Orbit, £5.99). In the first few chapters it's all he can do to maintain his senior midshipman status before being catapulted into the Captain's position. The dogged Seafort strives to do his duty and remain true to his own sense of honour in the face of a series of events that would daunt even the most experienced officer, including first contact with some very alien aliens. No matter how desperately he manages to overcome one disaster, another looms. The sequence continues in

Challenger's Hope (Orbit, £5.99) with Seafort put in command of a doomed, drifting vessel, and then in *Prisoner's Hope* (Orbit, £5.99) with him defending a colony world against rebellion from within and alien attack from without.

As for Seafort himself, well, he's a serious, strait-laced sort of hero, very much a product of his god-fearing, authority-respecting age, and – since it's the future we're supposedly peering into rather than the past when they just had to get on with things without the benefit of experience – you're not necessarily going to support that

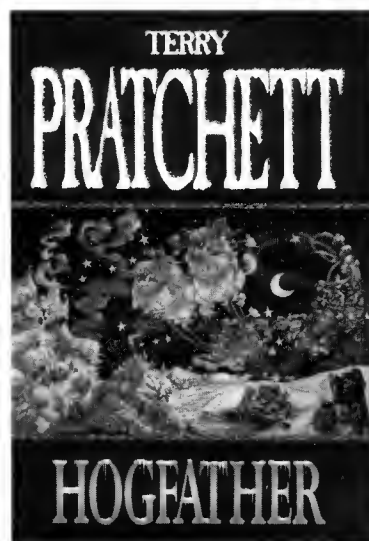
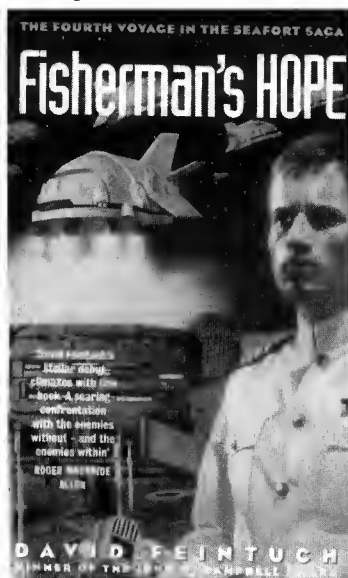
many of his command decisions. However, what might win you over is the fact that Seafort is his own harshest critic, and the more of a hero he becomes to those around him, the more withering his own verdict on himself. Also, Feintuch has him pay again and again for success and survival; someone tells Seafort, “you're a survivor”: true; but that doesn't mean it's safe for the supporting characters to stay too close to him.

With Orbit stacking the shelves with the Seafort books at the rate of a title a month, someone must believe (or Hope) that Feintuch is going to be as successful over here as he's been in the States. And that someone may be right – the books are page-turners, with clearly delineated characters caught up in a well-ratcheted narrative – effectively one sustained tale, tidied up into four volumes by not so much endings as breathing spaces for Seafort and the reader. (Seafort's adventures conclude in *Fisherman's Hope*, Orbit, £5.99.)

As for Weber's female take on *Hornblower*, Honor Harrington, on the strength of *Honor Among Enemies* (Bantam, £4.99) which catches her midway through her adventures, she too has to fight those wearing enemy uniform, but many of her own superiors as well. While not as tortured or as hidebound as Seafort, she too is driven by a sense of duty and personal honour, and is (you've guessed it) practically the one competent individual in a navy controlled by well-connected tradition-driven aristocrats. But although the details may seem similar, it's impossible to summon up the least enthusiasm for the adventures of Honor Harrington. Unlike Feintuch, Weber doesn't so much tell his story as drone it: very turgid stuff indeed, with characters so thin you can see right through the cardboard.



Yet another reworking of the *Hornblower* myth is Terry Pratchett's Discworld novel, *Hogfather* (Gollancz, £15.99) – or rather it would be if we had slid down the other leg of the fabled Trousers of Time to the parallel world where Terry targeted the nautical yarn for his particular brand of redevelopment. As it is though, in this leg it's Santa – and Christmas – that Pratchett has zeroed in on. His brooding, bumbling version of the Grim Reaper has to step in at the last moment when, with Hogswatchnight approaching, the jolly old Hogfather is missing. Death has to hitch up the sleigh (pulled, incidentally, by pigs) and





climb down chimneys to deliver Hogstide prezzies – but he's finding it difficult to get the HO HO HO right. Meanwhile, Death's grand-daughter, Susan, has been drafted in to help sort things out; there's a psychopathic member of the Assassins Guild called Mr Teatime (no, it's not pronounced that way) on

the loose, we meet some new characters such as a talkative raven with a fondness for eyeballs and the *oh god* of hangovers, the Unseen University magicians make a welcome appearance, and everything's roped together by a plot of some sort.

All right, it isn't the Hornblower-Discworld epic, but it's definitely

Pratchett sailing comfortably along with humour, invention and his usual cheering humanity filling his sails. Christmas may be a long time past by now but if you want to conjure back up some of its festive spirit then this will not disappoint.

Neil Jones

As each of the last three centuries has dwindled to its end Europe has produced a *fin-de-siècle* culture haunted by a sense of terminus. In the imagination of a significant minority, the dying of each century has come to symbolize the manner of other deaths, and the consciousness that history will continue is customarily masked by the notion that the new can only arise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the old. *Fin-de-siècle* culture is always hospitable to the morbid, the extreme, the visionary and the frankly bizarre; it always plays host to literary and social movements which celebrate the obsolescence of all orthodoxies and the transcendence of all tradition.

As the 18th century wound to its end *fin-de-siècle* consciousness produced the key works of the Marquis de Sade, Goya's *Caprichos*, the prophetic writings of William Blake, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Malthus's *Essay on Population* and a dramatic upsurge in the fashionability of the Gothic novel. It was, however, the 19th century which gave *fin-de-siècle* sensibility the name which fits it best: Decadence. The inspiration of the French Decadent Movement was exported all over Europe, but in Britain it had the misfortune to collide with the last noxious gasp of Victoria bigotry and was crucified, along with Oscar Wilde, by the Marquess of Queensberry. The English were, by then, far too stiff in the upper lip to produce any wholehearted Decadents, but they imported a few from elsewhere: Wilde from Ireland, Arthur Machen from Wales, M. P. Shiel from the Caribbean and Count Stanislaus Eric Stenbock from Estonia.

In literary terms, Stenbock (1860-1895) was the least of these, but he made up for that in his lifestyle, which Arthur Symonds – never a man for understatement – described as “bizarre, fantastic, feverish, eccentric, extravagant, morbid and perverse.” His one collection of short stories has now been reprinted, together with one other and two translations from Balzac, in a limited edition of 300 copies: *Studies of Death* (Durtro Press, 1996, £27 UK, £28 Europe, £30 USA/Japan from BCM Wound, London WC1N 3XX). The best of them are the excellent *conte cruel* “Viol d’Amor” and the exotic allegorical werewolf story “The Other Side,” but the pre-Stokerian “The True Story of a Vampire” is of some historical interest and “The Egg of the Albatross” offers a

blithely sarcastic gloss on Coleridge's classic. Although there is nothing here nearly as powerful as Machen's “The Great God Pan” or Shiel's “Vaila” the collection as a whole offers a pellucid and altogether typical example of one aspect of Decadent sensibility.

Modern fantasy and horror fiction have, of course, indulged *fin-de-siècle* consciousness to the full, popularizing it in a fashion that could not have been possible in the 1890s, let alone the 1790s. The reflective and recapitulative Decadence of writers like Thomas Ligotti and Tom Holland exists alongside the best-selling works of Anne Rice and Clive Barker and the calculated extremisms of Poppy Z. Brite and Pat Califia. The Decadent lifestyle is no longer the sole province of aristocratic aesthetes like William Beckford and Count Stenbock; is now accessible at street level. Its most flagrant contemporary manifestation is that catalogued by Mick Mercer in *The Hex Files: The Goth Bible* (Batsford, 1996, £17.99), which dutifully records the manner in which the Goth subculture – which Mercer's previous book, *Gothic Rock* (1992) was able to treat purely in terms of musical taste and dress codes – has forged strong links with vampire fandom, neo-paganism and the S/M “fetish scene.”

The material contained in *The Hex Files* will be of interest to many *Interzone* readers mainly for its coverage of vampire-related fanzines and organizations (although there are substantial entries on such writers as Storm Constantine and Freda Warrington there is little in the way of bibliographical detail or critical comment). It is, however, worth noting that much of the music detailed and discussed in its pages is strongly influenced by the imagery of dark fantasy fiction. Although vampires predominate – Thee Vampire Guild recently issued the third and last of its “What Sweet Music They Make...” compilation CDs – Lovecraftian imagery is also widespread.

Decadent Delights

Brian Stableford

So fast do fashions change in music whose core followers are young that old stalwarts The Sisters of Mercy and Fields of the Nephilim barely rate a mention in *The Hex Files* (and now tend to be referred to in the fanzines as “retro-Goth”). The bands Mercer now regards as cutting-edge – which include Italy's Ataraxia, France's Corpus Delicti, and Germany's Sopor Aeternus and the Ensemble of Shadows – all exhibit highly-developed cultural sensibilities. Not only are their lyric-writers widely-read and poetically ambitious but their acquaintance with musical styles is remarkably expansive. Ataraxia, in particular, display such an awesome eclecticism that their music is quite unclassifiable. (I reviewed Ataraxia's *Il Fantasma dell'Opera* in *IZ* 114; a good sampler of their work is the *femme fatale* “anthology” *Le Malédiction d'Ondine* and their most recent release is *The Moon Sang on the April Chair*.)

Sopor Aeternus and the Ensemble of Shadows are more uniform in stylistic terms but their now-distinctive sound is a fabulously ultra-Gothic compound of the modern and the quasi-Medieval (their magnificent second album, *Todeswunsch*, is subtitled “sous le soleil de saturne” but the majority of its lyrics are in English). Even in Britain and America, where avant-gardism is much less fashionable, the ambition of bands like Faith and the Muse (whose *Mabinogion*-influenced album *Annwyn Beneath the Waves* is so good that even a pedant like me can forgive them for not being able to spell *Annwn*) and Inkubus Sukkubus is gradually and inexorably increasing the richness and the complexity of the music they make.

The modern technology of samplers and synthesizers allows two or three musicians to command a virtual orchestra as well as a rock band and – if they so wish – a choir and a troupe of Medieval troubadours, while the production of CDs is sufficiently cheap to allow multitudinous small recording companies to function independently of the major labels and their chain-store retailers. Within this cultural undergrowth all kinds of fascinating experiments are being carried on. *The Hex Files* is an invaluable guide to all those which partake most fully of a *fin-de-siècle* sensibility – and which ought, therefore, to be of interest to anyone with a serious interest in the dark fantasies of the 1990s.

Brian Stableford

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Barrow, John D. **The Artful Universe.** "The Cosmic Source of Human Creativity." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-023249-4, x+274pp, C-format paperback, £12.50. (Popular science text, concerning the physical and mathematical bases of art and our sense of the aesthetic; first published in the USA, 1995; an interview with John Barrow [by Paul J. McAuley] appeared in *Interzone* 73, but this is the first of his books we have been sent for review; recommended to all sf writers!) 27th February 1997.

Britton, David. **The Adventures of Meng & Ecker.** "The best comic book on Earth." Illustrated by Kris Guidio. Edited by Michael Butterworth. Savoy [279 Deansgate, Manchester M3 4EV], ISBN 0-86130-099-8, unpaginated [but substantial: about 250pp], very large-format paperback, £9.99. (Horror graphic collection, first edition; the much-banned, and in some quarters much-praised, comic is collected here for the first time [although they say over half the book consists of previously unpublished material]; there are a few articles interspersed throughout, including one by Brian Stableford; see Andy Robertson's reviews of past issues of the comic in *Interzone* issues 70 and 83; Kathy Acker, Douglas E. Winter and others praise it on the back cover – while George Steiner damns it ["lavatory infantile filth"]; definitely one of a kind: recommended to those who want the strongest meat.) 24th March 1997.



Brust, Steven, and Emma Bull. **Freedom and Necessity.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85974-0, 444pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; what have we here?: it's a long epistolary novel set in mid-19th-century England, and it's set about with quotes from Hegel, Marx and Engels; yes, it may be the first Marxist steampunk fantasy!) March 1997.

Butler, Octavia E. **Blood Child and Other Stories.** Seven Stories Press [632 Broadway, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10012, USA], ISBN 1-888363-36-3, x+145pp, small-press paperback, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1996; despite the publisher's name, the book contains five stories and two essays; recommended: the title piece [Asimov's, 1984] won Hugo and Nebula awards; this is the American paperback edition with a British price added, distributed in the UK by Turnaround, Unit 3, Olympia Trading Estate, Coburg Rd., London N22 6TZ.) 13th February 1997.

Campbell, Ramsey. **The House on Nazareth Hill.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3996-7, 470pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Peter Crowther in *Interzone* 113.) 30th January 1997.

Cannell, Stephen J. **Final Victim: A Novel.** Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-7181-4209-8, 376pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Hi-tech horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this one may belong more to crime fiction than to sf or horror; it seems to be about computer-nerd serial killers; the author, whose debut novel this may be, is a very experienced TV writer [just like Karen Hall – see below], who has written for *The Rockford Files*, *The A-Team* and many other shows.) 27th February 1997.

Clough, Brenda W. **How Like a God.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86263-6, 287pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "realistic fantasy"; the author, Brenda Wang Clough, born 1955, has previously had books published by DAW.) March 1997.

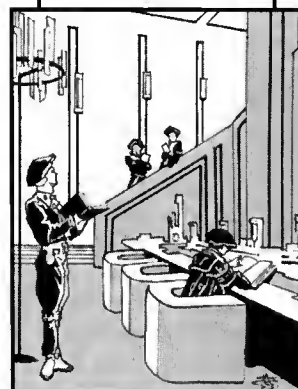
Drake, David. **Fireships.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00417-2, 323pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; it appears to be the third in a space opera series which began with *Igniting the Reaches* and *Through the Breach*, neither of which we saw; in a two-page afterword the author states that the plot is based on events in the life of Sir Francis Drake [no relation].) 1st February 1997.

Duncan, Dave. **Past Imperative: Round One of The Great Game.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14509-2, 477pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 13th February 1997.

Farris, John. **Dragonfly.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-5159-4, 506pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 27th February 1997.

Feintuch, David. **Fisherman's Hope.** "The Fourth Voyage in the Seafort Saga." Orbit, ISBN

BOOKS RECEIVED



JANUARY 1997

1-85723-440-5, 482pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Youll, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 6th February 1997.

Frankos, Steven. **A Legend Reborn.** "The epic conclusion to the saga begun in *Beyond Lich Gate*." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00419-9, 371pp, A-format paperback, cover by Maren, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 1st February 1997.

Hall, Karen. **Dark Debts.** "The supernatural thriller of the decade." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-68473-7, 423pp, hardcover, cover by Brad Gray, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the author, whose debut novel this probably is, is a very experienced TV writer, recipient of "Emmy Award nominations for her work on *M*A*S*H*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Moonlighting* and *The Women of Brewster Place*.") 21st March 1997.

Hobb, Robin. **Assassin's Quest: The Farseer III.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224608-2, 742pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym for fantasy writer Megan Lindholm, although her publishers on both sides of the Atlantic are still keeping this officially secret.) 3rd March 1997.

Hutson, Shaun. **Stolen Angels.** "The unthinkable is about to become the unspeakable..." Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0125-S, viii+403pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Taylor, £5.99. (Horror/suspense



novel, first published in 1996.) 6th February 1997.

Jefferies, Mike. **Fantasy Art. "Learn to Draw."**

HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-412995-4, 64pp, very large-format paperback, cover by the author, £5.99. (Fantasy art "how-to" book, by a well-known British fantasy novelist and illustrator; first edition; there are black-and-white [some pages blue-and-white] illustrations throughout.) February 1997.

Kerr, Katharine, ed. **Sorceries.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648226-0, xii+434pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £5.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1996; it's co-copyright Martin H. Greenberg; a big volume of original stories about sorcerers, shamans and magicians, it contains work by Constance Ash, Margaret Ball, Jo Clayton, Charles de Lint, Teresa Edgerton, Gregory Feeley, Esther M. Friesner, M. John Harrison, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Simon Ings, Lisa Mason, Diana L. Paxson, Mike Resnick, Josepha Sherman, Susan Schwartz, Lawrence Watt-Evans and others.) 17th February 1997.

Lewitt, Shariann. **Interface Masque.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85627-X, 350pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's second book from Tor, it's described as "a hard sf novel of high-tech data manipulation in a baroque future Venice.") March 1997.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Dragons-eye.** "A Dragonriders of Pern Novel." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38821-6, 353pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Peterson, \$24. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; is this, just possibly, the same book as appeared in Britain last year as *Red Star Rising*?; there's no mention of the latter in the "Other Titles" listing inside.) 1st February 1997.

McQuinn, Donald E. **With Full Honors.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40045-3, 374pp, A-format paperback, cover by Donato Giancola, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; as the code word "honor" in the title reveals, it's military sf, by a writer with 20

years' experience in the U.S. Marine Corps – and previously author of the post-holocaust quasi-fantasy trilogy, *Warrior, Wanderer and Witch*.) 1st January 1997.

Manachino, Albert J. **Noctet: Tales of Madonna-Moloch.** Illustrated by Larry Dickison. Foreword by Charles R. Saunders. Argo Press [PO Box 4201, Austin, TX 78765-4201, USA], ISBN 0-9634181-3-0, x+189pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Horror-weird collection, first edition; we've not heard of this author before, but apparently he's a veteran of the American small press [born 1924], and is commended by the likes of Charles de Lint and the late Frank Belknap Long.) January 1997.



Marshall-Wright, David. **Savannah.** Lief Publishing [Cloud House, Coxhoe, Co. Durham DH6 4AA], ISBN 0-9525282-0-7, 255pp, small-press paperback, cover by Elisa Baron, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1995; this is described as the "second edition"; the author is British, born 1954, and it's probably his debut book.) Late entry: 1996 publication, received in January 1997.

May, Julian. **Sky Trillium.** "The dramatic conclusion to the Trillium saga." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224197-8, 300pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first

published in the USA, 1996; fifth in the "Trillium" series, apparently initiated by Julian May but other parts of which have been written by Marion Zimmer Bradley and Andre Norton.) 3rd February 1997.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Fall of Angels.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-447-2, 560pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the sixth "Recluce" novel; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 6th February 1997.

Pratchett, Terry. **Johnny and the Bomb.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-S2968-0, 238pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first published in 1996; third in the "Johnny" trilogy which began with *Only You Can Save Mankind*; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 111.) February 1997.

Reed, Peter J., and Marc Leeds, eds. **The Vonnegut Chronicles: Interviews and Essays.** "Contributions to the Study of World Literature, Number 65." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29719-3, xxiv+257pp, hardcover, £43.95. (Anthology of interviews with, and essays about, the sometime sf satirist Kurt Vonnegut; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price; it's distributed in the UK by

Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; the focus is mainly on the subjects' later works, and the bibliography usefully supplements that to be found in Pieratt & Klinkowitz's *Kurt Vonnegut: A Comprehensive Bibliography* [1987]; it also contains 12 pages of black-and-white reproductions of drawings and paintings by Vonnegut.) Late entry: August 1996 publication, received in January 1997.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **Prince of Demons: The Renshai Chronicles, Volume Two.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-442-0, xii+622pp, hardcover, cover by

Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; "Mickey Zucker Reichert" is the form of her name used by American doctor and writer Miriam S. Zucker.) 10th February 1997.

Saul, John. **The Blackstone Chronicles, Part 1: An Eye for an Eye: The Doll.** "Serial terror in 6 parts." Fawcett Crest, ISBN 0-449-22781-2, 82pp, A-format paperback, \$2.99. (Horror novella, first edition; well, if Stephen King can do it...; as we said of the similar King opus, *The Green Mile*, this latest John Saul is a part-novel, to be published as six slim paperbacks at monthly intervals, and as such it's reminiscent of 19th-century horror part-works, e.g. Thomas Peckett Prest's *Sweeney Todd, the Deman Barber of Fleet Street* and James Malcolm Rymer's *Vamey the Vampire*; the major difference is that the vast epics of Prest, Rymer, et al, ran to scores, even hundreds, of parts selling at a penny apiece – that was in the day when new hardcover novels cost one and a half guineas [31 shillings and sixpence], and thus part-publication proved a useful device for reaching the very poorest readers who couldn't possibly have bought a novel in any other form.) 7th January 1997.

Saul, John. **The Blackstone Chronicles, Part 2: Twist of Fate: The Locket.** Fawcett Crest, ISBN 0-449-22784-7, 86pp, A-format paperback, \$2.99. (Horror novella, first edition.) 4th February 1997.

Silverberg, Robert. **Starborne.** Voyager, ISBN 0-586-21109-8, 291pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Paul J. McAuley in *Interzone* 110.) 17th February 1997.

Stasheff, Christopher. **The Sage: The Star Stone, Book Two.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39244-2, 341pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Youll, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 1st January 1997.

Steakley, John. **Vampire\$.** Signet, ISBN 0-45-145562-2, 357pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990;

it's about vampire-hunters – bounty hunters, that is; hence the dollar sign in the title.) *13th February 1997.*

Tessier, Thomas. **Fog Heart.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06452-8, 319pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; Tessier, who is American but used to live and work as a publisher in Britain, seems to have been away from the field for some time, so this represents his “comeback” novel.) *24th April 1997.*

Tolkien, J. R. R. **Tales from the Perilous Realm.** Harper-

Collins, ISBN 0-261-10342-3, 178pp, hardcover, cover by Roger Garland, £12.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition; this is a long-overdue bringing-together of the four shorter tales published in Tolkien's lifetime – “Farmer Giles of Ham” [1949], “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil” [1961], “Leaf by Niggle” [1964] and “Smith of Wootton Major” [1967].) *3rd February 1997.*

White, James. **The White Papers.** Edited by Mark Olson and Bruce Pelz. Introductions by Mike Resnick and Walt Willis. NESFA Press [PO Box

809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-71-4, 395pp, hardcover, cover by Vincent Di Fate, \$25. (Sf and non-fiction collection; first edition; it contains ten stories, a similar number of fannish articles [illustrated with old cartoons], and appendices by Gary Louie on White's best-known creation, the space hospital “Sector General”; this fine fat book was issued to mark White's appearance as Guest of Honour at last year's World SF Convention; as we remarked before, he is an author more lauded in America than in this,

his native country [where, alas, his novels are out of print].) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in January 1997.*

Willis, Connie, and Cynthia Felice. **Promised Land.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00405-9, 362pp, hardcover, cover by David R. Darrow, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; it's a belated follow-up to two earlier collaborations by the same authors, *Light Raid* and *Water Witch*; planetary romance stuff – “set on the plains of a distant world, and in the confines of the human heart.”) *1st February 1997.*

Bulis, Christopher. **A Device of Death.** “Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures.” Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20501-4, 259pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *20th February 1997.*

Gems, Jonathan. **Mars Attacks!** Signet, ISBN 0-45-119640-6, 284pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1996; it's based on the screenplay by Gems for the film directed by Tim Burton, itself spun off from a Topps Company series of trading cards; author Gems is a British-born playwright-turned-screenwriter, now living in Los Angeles; this is probably his first book.) *6th February 1997.*

Hambly, Barbara. **Planet of Twilight.** “Star Wars.” Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-09540-4, 312pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to the same author's *Children of the Jedi*.) *15th April 1997.*

Jones, Karen R. **Mars Attacks!: The Art of the Movie.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40998-1, x+159pp, very large-format paperback, \$20. (Lavishly illustrated study of the production designs, storyboards, models, etc., used in the sf film *Mars Attacks!*, directed by Tim Burton [and spun off from a Topps Company series of trading cards]; first edition.) *Late entry: 7th November 1996 publication, received in January 1997.*

Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and share-crops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term “Spinoffery” is used for the sake of brevity.

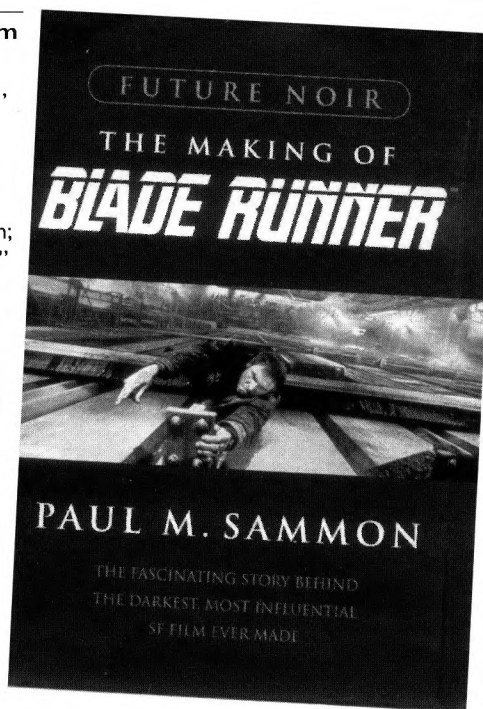
Orman, Kate. **The Room With No Doors.** “The New Adventures.” Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20500-6, 259pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; again, the “Doctor Who” logo is missing from this one – no doubt the publishers are preparing readers for the fact that Virgin's “Who” franchise is running out: the BBC have clawed back the rights to the character.) *20th February 1997.*

Perry, Steve. **Shadows of the Empire.** “Star Wars.” Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50472-X, 385pp, A-format paperback, cover by Drew Struzan, £4.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) *13th March 1997.*

Reeves-Stevens, Judith and Garfield. **Star Trek Phase II: The Lost Series.** Pocket, ISBN 0-671-53839-6, 360pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Mike Minor, £12.99. (Illustrated account of an sf television-series-that-never-was; first published in the USA, 1997; it's about the projected second *Star Trek* series, planned in the 1970s but not brought to

fruition; includes original production drawings, storyboards and scripts; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *March 1997.*

Sammon, Paul M. **Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner.** Orion, ISBN 0-75280-739-0, xix+441pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Illustrated account of the making of the most influential sf movie of the 1980s, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids*



Dream of Electric Sheep?; first published in the USA, 1996.) *January (?) 1997.*

Scott, Melissa. **The Garden.** “Star Trek: Voyager, #11.” Pocket, ISBN 0-671-56799-3, 278pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *February 1997.*

Stackpole, Michael A. **The Bacta War: X-Wing, Book Four.** “Star Wars.” Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40924-7, x+349pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, £4.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997 [we seem not to have received Book 3 of this tetralogy].) *13th February 1997.*

Van Hise, James. **The Unauthorized Trekker's Guide to The Next Generation and Deep Space Nine.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648291-0, 366pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Unillustrated, unofficial guide to the making of the two named *Star Trek* spinoff TV series; first published in the USA, 1992 and 1995 [it seems to be a combination of two shorter books].) *3rd February 1997.*

Wilson, David Niall. **Chrysalis.** “Star Trek: Voyager, #12.” Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00150-7, 279pp, A-format paperback, £4.50. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *March 1997.*

BARRINGTON BAYLEY: trade paperback editions of *Empire of Two Worlds*, *Annihilation Factor* (novels) and *Seed of Evil* (collection), £5 each (inland, inc. p&p), signed and personalized, from 48 Turreff Avenue, Telford, Shropshire TF2 8HE.

THE WRAP PARTY – single-event SF convention to celebrate completion of *Babylon 5*. August 1998, London. Harlan Ellison, Straczynski. Programme covers written SF and how it influences Radio, Television, Cinema, Comics. PO Box 505, Reading RG1 7QZ.

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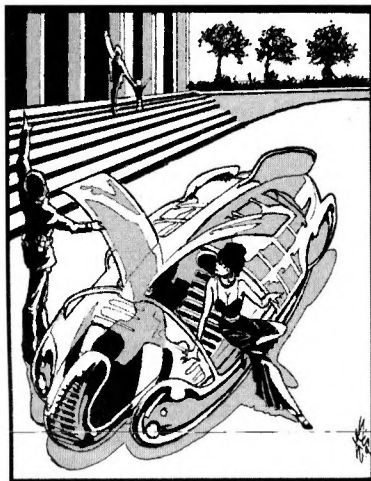
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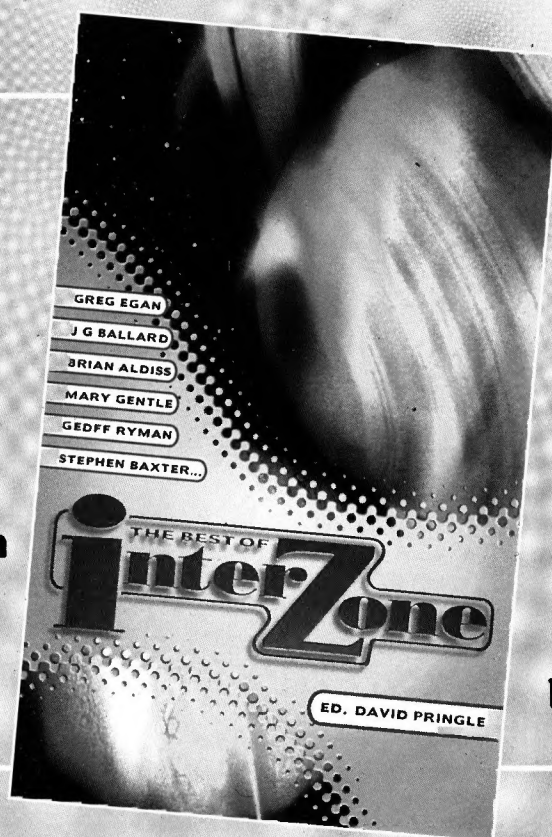
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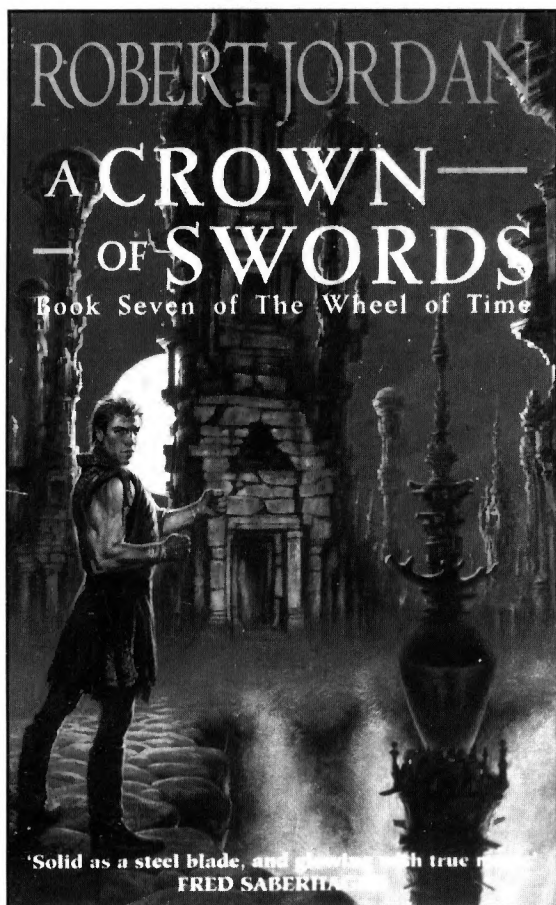
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